

Wandering

by NejinOniwa

Rating: Everyone

Tags:

Length: 59,047 words (Incomplete)

In the land of the midnight sun, there are still untouched remnants of the ancient wilderness that once covered most of the North. A party of hikers in the Sarek National Park are stumped as one of their number is lost without a trace, and they have no clue as to how aside from the fact that the weather seems to be acting up a bit more than usual.

Meanwhile in Equestria, the Changeling invasion has just been thwarted, and Shining Armor and Cadence's spell has scattered the forces of the swarm all across the land. They are weakened by their defeat and completely lost in a lifeless wilderness, and Chrysalis fears the worst.

This would surely have come to pass, were it not for the appearance of the perhaps even more lost hiker in her camp - who now must deal best he can with a mysterious alien species, and an even more alien world.

Wandering builds on the backdrop of the [Mercurial Archives](#), and reading that story alongside this one is highly recommended. Please refer to individual chapter author's notes for details.

FEATURED ON 19/2 2013

Entry #1 - Wandering

Wandering

Entry #1

30th of June

Location: Lake Guordesloppal, on the border of Stora Sjöfallet NP and Sarek NP (67°24'00N 18°05'56E, 750m ASL)

Jokkmokk municipality, Norrbotten, Sweden

I noted the snow-crested peak of Sarvatjåkkå, somewhat visible in the distant southwest as I reeled my line in. We'd gotten a decent haul – it had definitely been worth the somewhat roundabout entry route we'd taken, since our initial supply load had been considerably lighter than last year. On our previous expedition – okay, I'm being pretty precocious here, but hey – we'd simply brought way too much stuff.

“That’s gotta be enough for now, I think.” I kept my eyes on the line to make sure it didn’t tangle, but my words were directed at the woman sitting with her own line still in the water a few meters to the side. “There’s not much use packing light to begin with if we’re just going to fill it all up as we go. Besides, I’m pretty sure fishing here is sort of skirting the law pretty damn close. Reel up, Freja.”

My sister gave me a doubtful glance, before returning her eyes to her line. “Since when did you ever give two shits about the law, Martin?” She did start reeling in, though. Most likely, the thought had occurred to her as well.

I gave a chuckle in reply as I wound up the string around the little handle it was attached to, fastening the little package with the hook and sinker.

“That’s not what I’m worried about. What I *am* worried about is mom reading someone’s log when we get back home. Imagine the looks of that in

the media. ‘EPA department head sponsors fishing in national parks!’ I mean, not that she’d do that, but still.”

Freja simply rolled her eyes at this as she finished wrapping up her own bundle of fishing gear, and we started back toward our bags and the rest of the group. We were done with the reels now, and they’d be spending the rest of the expedition safely tucked in with the rest of our equipment. Fishing in regulated waters bordering two national parks might be just about passable in the gray morals of reality, but doing so *inside* would just be plain stupid. Blatantly illegal, as well, but that’s largely beside the point.

The haul was in the middle of being sliced up and sizzled for lunch. The rest of our eight-man team were huddled around our pair of trangias in a tight circle. Not that it was cold in any way – even this far north, with the sun up it usually stays warm unless it’s windy – more than likely they were just as hungry as me and Freja. Despite our reasonably light packs, the ten-kilometer cross country leg had taken a fair toll on our stomachs, and we had just as far to go in the afternoon. Except that we’d now be heading straight south, midnight sun right in our faces all the way, instead of northwest with a small mountain in the way of its gods-be-damned light. The day was far from over, yet; and we’d planned the expedition to last a week and some, well more than enough to have your face burnt to flaking red crisps if you weren’t careful.

Then again, glaring sun is usually the better alternative by far. Sarek is infamous for its harsh weather, and frankly, if we’d brought enough equipment to weather the worst storms it could possibly throw at us, we wouldn’t even have made it to the train station.

So now we were barreling on through the wilderness, hoping and praying that the weather gods would see fit to not drop the sky over our heads before we at least made it all the way in. After all, going back is just a matter of keeping your legs going – there’s not exactly any issue of morale when all you’re doing is going back to civilization. Going *in*, you always have the option of turning back. Which is good if you find yourself facing 25m/s stormwinds and hammering rain on the first day, because advancing in those conditions, up here? Bloody stupid, that’d be. Not to mention that the jokks would all flood and stop you from getting anywhere at all.

Fortunately the weather luck from last year seemed to be keeping up still. It was the third day of our expedition, and we had yet to be rained on, stormed on, have our tents blown away while we were sleeping, or get our camp overrun by reindeer – which does actually happen sometimes, with very little benefit to either party of the conflict.

About an hour later, we were once again preparing to depart. Or, the others were, at least – I'd been all ready since five minutes after I finished eating. Hoisting my backpack, I went to scout ahead a bit.

I'm fairly certain that this decision was what dragged me into this whole mess.

While surveying the area to the southwest, I caught a glimpse of something in the sky, moving about in the corner of my eye. I didn't pay it much heed at first, but it persisted, so after a few seconds I turned around to give it a look.

It was a cloud. White and fluffy, lazily drifting across the sky and covering the peak of Ähpar, to the south. A quite ordinary cumulus cloud – if you ignored the shining wisp of violet light swirling around it. I stared at the light for a few moments, waiting for my mind to stop playing games with my eyes, but when it finally disappeared it took the cloud with it. Suddenly, Ähpar's jagged peak was fully visible, and the mysterious cloud appeared right above me.

I'm imagining this was probably not too obvious to anyone not actually watching – at least that's the conclusion I've drawn from the fact that nobody mentioned anything about it, or were in the kind of brooding, mysterious mood people have when trying to hide something. To my eyes, though, it was easy to realize that this was no mere trick of the light – much despite the fact that it didn't make a single sound.

A second later, the cloud parted. In an instant, the cloud went from solid to split, and for a few moments a shining band of scintillating colors was visible, connecting the sky with the mountain across the lake, piercing upwards through the now parted cloud. A second or two after the beam

disappeared, the cloud formation blinked *again*, vanishing from my field of vision.

I spent two minutes just standing there, my eyes darting frantically, half trying to convince myself that I'd had a sunstroke or something that could explain what I'd seen, and half daring any of the other clouds to start screwing with the laws of nature. Then I shook down the building sense of panic in my mind and went back to the others; assuring myself, after none of them mentioned anything about teleporting clouds, that whatever I'd seen hadn't been real.

I convinced myself that since we were all pretty tired, and since I've had plenty of freak events happen to me in the past that I couldn't risk talking about without submitting myself to public ridicule, it was most likely in my best interest not to tell anyone else about this incident either.

In hindsight, that was not the best decision I've made in my life.

I spent the rest of the day in a glum mood, not talking too much with anyone. I kept scouting ahead, staying a couple hundred meters in front most of the time, looking for crossings whenever we came upon a jokk and guiding the party away from the masses of dense undergrowth that crowd around the smaller streams. I had my headphones on almost all the time, trying to clear my worries with the sound of heavy metal rumbling in my ears, and kept to myself whenever we stopped, absentmindedly chewing down mouthfuls of peanuts with both eyes fixed on the distant sky.

At 21:00 sharp we crossed the Guhkesvágge bridge, entering Sarek proper. The cloud cover was nonexistent, having cleared out rather suddenly a few hours before; thus, we were rather eager to make camp and get out of the sun. Luckily the Skanátjåhkå and Niendotjåhkå mountains shield this part of the valley from sunlight during most of the “night” – while the midnight sun is never very strong, it still makes sleeping a lot harder if you can't get into cover properly.

We split up in order to search for a good campsite south of the bridge. Most of the others opted to fan out northwest, in an attempt to find the campsite

we've used last year. For some reason, I decided to go southwest, following the small flows of water coming down from Vuojnesvárásj.

Looking back, there probably wasn't much I could've done about the situation at that point, but I still feel like I missed out on something. I don't know why, really. I guess it's one of those tiny subconscious things that keep nagging you for reasons you can never understand, until the day they mysteriously vanish and leave you wondering what it was all about in the first place.

Whatever the case, I felt like I reached the peak of Vuojnesvárásj far faster than I should have. After all, the distance from the bridge to the peak is 1,6 km, with an ascent of 200m – and that's the direct route, which would entail climbing up a pretty damn rough patch of rock with a full load on your back. Either way, it's not a distance you cover without putting your mind to it. I definitely hadn't planned on going the full way up, but I decided to take my camera up to take some pictures of the Ähpar valley on the other side of the peak. I walked the short distance that remained until I was at the top –

I don't really have any words to describe what I felt here. Ähpar was, simply put, gone. In its place was an expanse of open plainlands – far, far down.

Throwing a quick look at where I'd come from, the landscape was vaguely familiar – but there was definitely no bridge in sight, and the river, while flowing in roughly the same direction, was much further away than I'd expected. Fifteen kilometers, at least – about the distance we'd covered today. More to the point, this was definitely not a minor sub-peak with a prominence of 200 meters. This was an alp, true and true, and the distance down was way more than I could hope to accurately estimate just using my eyes. At least a kilometer. Probably more.

Unless there's been some stupidly stealthy terraforming going on without my noticing, I can say for certain there's no mountain this high in all of Sweden. Or the rest of Scandinavia, for that part. I know as much from personal experience; while I haven't climbed either Galdhöpiggen or Kebnekaise, the tallest mountains in Norway and Sweden respectively, I have done both Glittertind and Spijkka, who are both pretty close

competitors. Bottom line, there's nothing over 2500 meters. I've been up the Swiss alps in summer, though – and if anything, this was even bigger.

All in all, I was *extremely* lost. Which is the very last thing you want to be in the middle of absolute wilderness of northern Sweden. Or absolute wilderness anywhere, for that part.

What I could tell, though, was that unless my compass was lying to me I was still about as far north as I had been – the sun was still in the exact same position, though the lack of mountain cover had it peering out from a small patch of clouds in the far southwest. Unless I had randomly been warped to the southern hemisphere, it meant that at least my clock was still telling time correctly. Small blessings, maybe, but I take what I can get.

Getting a last look around, I noticed something moving down in the valley that separated this mountain from its still-higher neighbor to the northwest, the peak I'd thought was Vuojnestjåhkå. Fumbling around in my pack for a few seconds, I retrieved my binoculars to get a closer look.

Naturally the amount of clarity I could get with a pair of pretty lackluster binoculars from a mountaintop was pretty small – even if the valley was higher up than the plains to the east. However, I could confirm what I'd seen. *Something* was moving down there, and whatever they were, there was a great, big mass of them. As far as I knew, there was only one kind of herd animal up in these latitudes – one that, by chance, also happened to produce one of the most delicious kinds of meat there is.

Reindeer.

I was in full-on survival mode now, and damn any angry Sami who were going to try coming after me for killing his livestock. Besides, I already knew I wasn't in Sápmi anymore anyway, and to the best of my knowledge, they're the only reindeer-herders left in the world. For all purposes, this meant that whatever was down there was free game.

I started scrambling down the mountainside as fast as I could manage, while securing one of my bigger knives to the end of my trusty birch walking stick to use as a spear. Call me a cheater, but hey – at least I managed to get

totally lost in the wilderness with a full set of survival gear on my back, which is far better than most.

It seemed mother nature had sensed my plight. Much of my descent was composed of flat, snow-covered slopes that I could simply skate down, despite my lack of skiing gear. The last little leg of my run was a tight little pass, and while I was a little winded by this point, it was steep and well covered in pristine white, with a rather discreet exit. I'd have a running charge down a mountain at more than full speed, *and* an ambush all at the same time. I licked my lips as I struggled to keep my balance in the last turn – there's a *reason* you usually wear skis to ski down mountains, after all – but despite my being distracted by the tantalizing prospect of a feasting carnivore dream buffet, I managed to stand through it without losing speed. Like a hoplite with a jetpack, I raised my makeshift spear as my skid turned into a heavy run when the snow ran out under my feet. A second later, I shot out from behind a boulder into the massive, jet-black herd, spear first.

The plan was, admittedly, not the best one, but it wasn't really ridiculously bad either. For one of those spur-of-the-moment things, it was a pretty solid scheme to acquire some much-needed provisions. Hell knows I can't set traps for shit, and foraging at 67°N is pretty damn tough, I tell you.

The only major flaw in my plan was, of course, that it wasn't really applicable to creatures that could fly.

I sure as hell took them by surprise – I missed the first one I came across simply because I was going too fast to realize it was even there before I was already past it. It let out a loud yelp, and started flapping its fleshy green wings like a butterfly gone mad. If the others' progress on the same avenue were any indication, the bloody thing was probably up in the air second after I was past it. Damn, they got up fast!

It was hard to get a good look at them in the total chaos I'd spread around me, but they were sure as hell nothing like reindeer. They hissed like snakes and looked like enormous mutated insects on four legs. For some incomprehensible reason they were also riddled with tiny little holes all

over their bodies – like giant pieces of swiss cheese. Except that this swiss cheese was all black, and skittering with life.

Before too long, almost all of the creatures had gotten up in the air. Adrenaline was probably the only thing keeping me going at this point – running full speed down a mountain to hunt for food kind of gets to your head. If not for that, I should've realized that these were not the easy prey animals I'd been looking for.

There was, though, one group of slightly larger individuals that had remained on the ground, bracing themselves against my oncoming assault. I was closing in on them, even though most of my initial charge had lost its momentum and I was now mostly jogging. Then–

“What is the meaning of this *insolence*!? Seize this creature at once!”

Then I smashed face-first into a wall of black swiss cheese, sending my spear flying in a wide arc to the side.

If the surprised yelp that came from the creature I'd just rammed into was any clue, it hadn't been intent on actually getting in my path. If the *voice* that I'd heard the moment before the crash was any clue (and not just a hallucination or something), it was also most definitely a female – and a stuck-up as hell one, at that.

As to why and how the hell she was speaking English, well, your guess is as good as mine, but the fact that the whole “breaching the communications barrier” part of meeting a sentient alien species had been skipped over wasn't something I was going to complain about at the moment. Seeing as I had, you know, just charged in arms blazing intent on eating them.

As far as a knife tied to a stick could be “blazing”, anyway...

Several moments passed with me lying on the ground on top of the alien, trying to gather my addled wits best I could. Combined with my hunger, the fact that I was stuck with my face in what had bore an unmistakable likeness to swiss cheese – aside from the fact that it was stirring slightly, giving off brief, weak moans of pain every few seconds or so – distracted

me considerably from this endeavor. In the end, I just couldn't help myself. I stuck my tongue out and wet the surface a bit, before opening my mouth and taking a careful nibble of that cheese.

Three things happened at once. First of all, the piece of her flesh that I'd enclosed with my teeth came loose, slipping into my mouth. Second, the taste hit me – I'd been half expecting cheese, or even more likely some kind of sane meaty variant, but this was what, *CITRUS?* – like a fighter jet hitting a flock of geese while taking off.

Hard. Catastrophically hard.

Third, the inevitable reaction of someone taking a *bite* of you came from below, as the creature I'd tackled gave a frightened cry and scrambled away from me, wings and legs in one big incoherent mess. “Wha- wha- wha-a-AT ARE YOU D-D-DOING!? GET IT AWAY FROM ME!”

As I briefly realized that I was now surrounded on every side by an enormous, buzzing mass of smaller versions of her, I gave her a completely straight face and promptly stated:

“Yeah, you don't taste anything like swiss cheese at all, do you? I mean, is your blood lemons or something?”

She gaped. I realized she probably hadn't expected me to be able to speak. Well, that makes two of us.

Seconds later she shook her head, and on her face incredulous surprise changed to determination. It was a bit eerie how easily I could read her emotions, but her facial features weren't actually too far from most mammals'. She got to her feet – four sleek, hole-riddled shafts of black, somewhat like a lizard's with the slight metallic sheen they had to them – and advanced toward me. I started to feel slightly worried as the huge swarm around me drew ever closer along with her, but the moment the thought crossed my mind their slow advance came to a halt, and they started backing away slowly – leaving me alone face-to-face with what was evidently their leader.

I hoped for all my nonexistent luck that her first attempt at contact would not be reciprocation in kind and try to eat me back. All I could see in her eyes, though, was curiosity – and the scrutiny they put me under had me stressed indeed.

“Well,” she said as she cocked her head to the side slightly, “I’ve certainly never seen one like *you* before...”

Entry #2 - Negotiating

Negotiating

Entry #2

(Presumably) 1st of July

Looking at my clock, I realized time had completely outrun me during my mad dash down the mountain. It was just past midnight – which meant that either I had spent just above 2 hours running and snow-skating like a madman, or somehow managed to hit relativistic speed on foot without the clock noticing. Both of these were relatively insane prospects, but seeing how things in general had changed in that direction as well, I wasn't even going to bother trying to make a better explanation at the moment. I had other things to worry about. Namely, the black, talking, lemon-flavored swiss-cheese alien staring in my face, and her horde.

“Well,” I said, backing as she kept moving closer to me, “at least that excludes the possibility of excessive spying or abduction on your part. Honestly, that would've sucked.”

I cast my eyes about for a bit – the swarm was still around, but not quite as oppressive as it had been. Several of its ranks had returned to the ground, leaving only a minor force in the air above me. It was obviously an improvement, but it still felt pretty damn threatening. While they were probably pretty lightweight, if their sleek bodies and the way I floored their leader was any clue to their density, they were still *very* large for airborne creatures. Their wings were buzzing like a hummingbird's, but their bodies were the size of a wolf. *Flying* wolves, with canines like a sabertooth.

Doing my best to ignore the swarm, I stared back at the alien in front of me and drew my spare knife. “So, cheeseling. I'm about ten million dunnometers and probably a few hours off from my team's camp, and the

weather is positively fucking with me. You happen to have an explanation for that, or do I have to let Mister Sharp here do the talking?"

She stopped walking when I drew my knife, but that was about as far as that got me. She wasn't about to get intimidated. If anything, her eyes went from intent and curious to disapproving.

She was probably trying to save face after the rather embarrassing display she'd put on a few seconds earlier, and I'd say she was doing it pretty well. Recovering that fast, she could be a real hard-ass. Metaphorically at least – I mean, seeing as the rest of her was pretty soft and cheese-y, I don't think her ass would be much different.

"Mister Sharp," she began. She raised a foreleg – and probably an eyebrow too, but the lack of contrast made it hard to see – and pointed at my knife. "Really. You name your weapon like some classical era hero aspirant, and the best you can come up with is *Mister Sharp*? I suppose the one lying over there is called *Sir Pointy*? I was about to compliment your courage, but I'm starting to doubt its existence, what with your lack of naming sense."

Subtle threats and smartassing evidently didn't work on her, and she'd made the mistake of both letting her own *and* her minions' guards down, so I moved to the next part in my repertoire: plain threats.

While she was talking I'd strapped my pack off my back with my free hand, letting it drop to the ground unceremoniously. She blinked, and in a moment I closed the short distance separating us and snaked my arm around her slim neck, holding the knife close to her throat with the other. As a finishing blow, I put my forehead to hers, connecting just below the base of her strange, curved horn, and landed some heavy-duty one-liners straight to her face.

"Here's a tip: don't be a smartass when the guy in front of you has a knife and you don't. Besides, I like lemons. Is your head as soft and cheesy as your body, or is that just your sad excuse of a one-liner sense?"

The look on her face changed from smugness to surprise mixed with fear as I talked – she hadn't even realized what was happening before I had her. Her

eyes darted around, as if trying to find a way out, but I wasn't going to let that happen. I nudged the knife a bit, and tightened my grip on her neck. "Don't even try, cheesecake. Now answer my question. Where the fuck am I?"

I'm not sure what I was expecting, but her tearing up hadn't been one of them. I don't know why, but it made me feel bad. Very bad. I could hardly show a change of heart now, though, so I kept my face hard – though I moved my head back slightly, and lightened my grip a bit.

She was sobbing slightly, but nothing too much. Her crying was mostly silent, coming in small bursts of *violet* liquid while she talked. "I- I don't know! S-somewhere in the Icemarks north of Equestria, on a love-forsaken mo-mountain in the middle of nothing – it probably doesn't even have a name! I just got dumped here too, thanks to those pesky Equestrians, and I haven't even been able to get hold of a *tenth* of my swarm! Do you know how impossible it is to keep track of where you're going when you're knocked out and sent flying for half a day?"

I realized my grip had loosened significantly when she was halfway through her rant. For a brief second I thought she had used some sort of mind control on me, but when I eyed her again the explanation became obvious. She had *shrunk*. Not much, but she was perhaps a decimeter shorter, and most of her already slim body had started to thin up even further.

I looked at the drops of violet liquid that hung suspended from the edge of her cheeks, and felt an idea spring up in my mind. A fairly strange one, sure, but today that was pretty much the norm for how things went.

In lack of free hands, I opened my mouth and licked the colorful tears from her face.

For the second time in a very short time, my sense of taste was assaulted by an alien substance. However, it was most definitely the first time in my life that I'd ingested a liquified emotion. Even though I had no knowledge whatsoever on the creature before me, it was impossible to mistake the feeling for anything else. It wasn't even a taste – my tastebuds were just crudely used as a docking bay for the massive dropship of *absolute*

adoration that slammed into my head like a hammer. It wasn't a drug or any sort of stimulus – it just *was*. One second I was curious and determined to find out the truth of things, atop of my many layers of caution, pumping adrenaline and my mostly discarded rational limits; the next, there was nothing but *love*. Love was *everything, everywhere*.

Thankfully this tear-induced high only lasted a few seconds, and since it had also rendered me largely immobilized, the alien didn't get out of my grip. If anything, her body felt like it was going slack – her cheeks were slightly reddened, as if she was embarrassed. Not that that was very strange, seeing as I'd spent a considerable amount of time with my tongue lolling over her face – hell, I was embarrassed too.

What it *had* done to me, however, was completely wash away what little of my battle fury I had left. Fighting spirit had been replaced by rationality, and suddenly the situation felt extremely awkward – not to mention the fact that I now felt extremely uncomfortable about threatening her.

I'd gone soft.

I loosed my grip on her throat, and stepped back a bit. After some thought, I removed the knife. I wouldn't be able to do anything with it now, anyway. There wasn't a single shred of adrenaline in my system now, and all I could think of when I looked at her pretty much amounted to “scared little girl”. Sure, she'd been pompous and dangerous a minute ago, maybe, but that was irrelevant now; after all, rationality isn't rational in the least.

It was time to negotiate. But first, I had to get some kind of grip on what I was dealing with.

“So,” I started tentatively, looking her in the eye. Her expression hadn't changed much, which hopefully meant that she wasn't going to try and sic her minions on me or try anything else. “You're a sentient quadruped. You don't appear to have any level of tool usage, or any hands to use them with. However, you speak perfect English.” I let my eyes wander over the rest of her body, analyzing it as I slowly realized just how strange this creature actually was.

“You've got multiple holes in your flesh, but they don't seem to be wounds.” A thought came to mind, and a quick look confirmed it. “Instead, they seem to form naturally in places where you've been... bitten.”

I sheathed my knife, and ran my hand over the deep green scales covering her back area, where her wings connected to her body. They were small. Way too small. I wasn't sure if they'd just shrunk more than the rest of her had, but I was fairly certain they'd been too small before too.

“You can fly despite your body being much too large for the wings and weight you need to carry, and your body has the weirdest consistency I've ever seen in any living creature.”

I let go of her with both hands, and started stroking my beard. It usually helped me think. “To top it off, you shrink when you cry, and your tears appear to be some sort of secreted emotion. Do you have *any* idea just how impossible a creature you are? I've read my share of science fiction, but damn, you take the prize. Honestly, what the hell are you?”

Her legs were limp when I let go of her, and she sunk down to the ground. She looked rather pitiful, lying there like some plush animal that'd been designed by a bipolar eight-year old kid with a thing for insects and then abandoned in the forest.

She let out a small, joyless chuckle. “You're calling me impossible already. You haven't even seen me transform yet, and you can already tell what a complete *joke* the Changelings are?” She sighed heavily, and let her head fall to the ground as well. She splayed out her legs and rolled over to the side, completely vulnerable. It was unbelievable – I had just let her go, and now it was like she was asking me to take her again, threaten her, even kill her?

She looked me in the eyes, and her voice regained some of the harshness it'd had before. “And to top it off, you're what? Some dressed-up yeti with a patchwork spear and a carving knife. I crossed horns with Celestia herself – I dueled her, I defeated the ruler of the *sun!* – and here I am, at the mercy of some lost snowman without magic, who's too afraid to even dare finish me off because I'm such a *freak*.”

I stared at her, my mouth hanging open in disbelief. Was she *taunting* me? I couldn't believe my ears, but her apparent disappointment in my lack of reaction told me she'd actually *wanted* me to kill her.

Something was very, very wrong here, and I was pretty sure I was the reason for it.

She wasn't finished, apparently. She wasn't looking at me anymore, but instead around at the swarm surrounding us – who now appeared to have become completely oblivious to our existence. They just milled around slowly, seemingly confused about where they were. “It's probably too late for the others, but I thought at least I could do something for the ones I found. They were so brave for me... and all I gave them back was false hope and an early grave. They're going to just stand there, walk around a bit, for weeks and weeks not knowing what's going on. Slowly fading away until they're so light they'll be scattered by the winds.”

Her voice was growing weaker and weaker as she spoke, and suddenly I felt a sense of urgency. She was going to die, and with that I would be left alone in the wilderness with a bunch of lobotomized aliens around me. The prospect was disheartening.

Yet, she went on. “I could save them. I could save them. I could save them...” Her murmurs faded until they were almost inaudible, and her eyelids fluttered dangerously.

At that moment, somewhere deep in my heart, I couldn't help but admire the spirit of this Changeling, that cared so much for her minions, loved them so much seemed to think them her children, who was willing to sacrifice everything she was for their sake.

I felt for her, and the feeling was adoration itself as I had felt it only moments ago.

As the last sparks of her lifeforce went out, something else came and fanned her fires back to life. One second she was a crumpling, dying mess on the ground; the next, her eyes opened wide, glistening with life.

Life, energy and surprise.

“Oh!” Her exclamation was rather quiet, but that only served to emphasize it more. She blinked a few times, and then shot a confused stare at me. Slowly, confusion changed to clarity in her eyes as she seemed to understand whatever it was had happened. “Oh, my. I certainly hadn’t expected *that...*”

Entry #3 - Recovering

Recovering

Entry #3

(Presumably) 1st of July

By far, it was the most perplexed look I had seen on a face in my entire life. I was rather happy myself that I wasn't mirroring it – sure, I was just as confused as she seemed, but I've always been pretty good at walling up. It also helps that my “neutral” face is rather angry-looking. My eyebrows aren't exactly subtle.

Quite a few seconds passed with her just staring at me, unsure of what to do. During this brief timeframe I came to the conclusion that whatever *she* apparently had realized about this situation, which *probably* had something to do with why she now appeared to be completely revitalized and not a broken, dying husk, *I* didn't have a single clue about. The more I thought about it, the more it irritated me – I've never been much for people keeping secrets from me, and as any good academic I am hopelessly greedy for knowledge. I frowned, and thrust my head forward.

“HÖRRU!”

She jumped to her – feet? – and pranced backward, letting out a little yelp. “Wh-what are you doing!?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I'm shouting at you to make you stop staring at me, obviously.”

A slight tinge of frustrated red covered her face. “I noticed that, you trollop,” she said with a snort, throwing her head like a horse and sending her green hair flying.

“So why are you asking, if you already know the answer? Speaking of answers, there's quite a few of those you have to give me. So, Changeling, if that's what you call yourself. Talk. What the hell just happened? I mean, I'm pretty sure you were... dying, right there.”

Her eyes widened for a moment, before turning away from me. “I got better,” she mumbled, crossing her forelegs and lying down again, staring off in the distance.

I followed her gaze briefly – the sun had just gone into cover behind the mountain to our west, leaving us in relative darkness in its shadow. Turning back, I raised an eyebrow at her (I know, I do this a lot) until she looked back at me. “Oh, fine! But you're not going to like it.” I kept staring at her, and she growled slightly before continuing in a strained tone.

“Changelings are empathivores. We acquire sustenance by absorbing astral energy from nearby creatures. Sentient lifeforms produce astral energy in the form of emotions naturally, which we then convert to the various substances our bodies need to function.”

I kept staring at her, and raised my other eyebrow. (There is a slight difference to the expressions involved, as well – my left eyebrow is more of an “are you serious” eyebrow, while my right eyebrow conveys something more in the way of “what the hell are you talking about” when raised. It's complicated, trust me.) She groaned. “Look! Is it that hard to understand? Your soul emits emotions when you feel them, and we eat them! It's not like you do anything with them anyway!”

I took a few moments to try and process what she'd just said. I would've rejected the idea straight away, if not for the fact that it made perfect sense. As it was, most concepts of what I like to call my “primary” view of the world had been completely thrown aside, in favor for the much less rational ones harbored in the “secondary”. Usually, I keep that side of my head for when I'm writing, or formulating wild guesses on plot outcomes for some of the less realistic TV series I watch.

A few seconds passed as I forced myself to accept that insanity was now the norm, had an internal debate on whether I should record all this and write a

paper on it, decided to postpone the decision and finally took a deep breath.

“Right! While that obviously seems physically impossible or at least stupidly unlikely, it does seem to make sense. So you feed off people's emotions.”

I had, much due to the internal debate, switched over to the rather overdone Oxford accent I have at times. This resulted in a pair of raised eyebrows from the Changeling, as I continued my theoretical ramblings.

“And that means what? You can't survive on your own? You need sympathy to live? Other certain emotions? That does seem hideously impractical.”

I took a pause to look at her, trying to gather my now erupting thoughts. The world mostly governed by the laws of physics I knew had been replaced by something that obviously disregarded plenty of them and had its own ideas for everything else, and my head was in uproar trying to catch up. I was about to go on, when she suddenly blurted, “Love.”

An awkward silence went through the air for a second or two, before she spoke up again. “Love is our primary source of energy, and the only one we can't be without. We require a multitude of different energies to function, but love is the only one we need to stay alive. We can also synthesize all other vitemos from it.” A pause. Then, grudgingly: “Naturally, it is also the most troublesome by far to come by. It hardly grows on trees...”

I gaped for a second or two, before responding. “Wow. Seriously, that is so cheesy I can feel the fat clogging up my arteries. They should call you Queen Cheddy of the Cheeselings.”

In my mind I could do nothing but wonder what sort of evolutionary chaos this sort of species could've arisen out of. If they even had evolved.

“I am not called— *that!* I am Queen Chrysalis, sovereign of the Hives, and you shall mock me no further!”

She stood up, and her voice became slightly distorted, splitting into two separate tones. Her wings ricketed as they started beating furiously, and she

soared into the air briefly. She reared up on her hind legs, and suddenly her horn started glowing fiercely, burning with a greenish flame. This, I admit, scared the shit out of me – it was much like as if someone had magically produced a ray gun out of thin air. I had virtually no idea what the horn could do, but all too many fanciful, horrible guesses.

The fire became a blinding flash of light, that lit up the valley in a bright green that overtook the shadowed sunlight. I could barely make out her silhouette as I shielded my eyes from the brilliance, but after a few seconds the glaring light suddenly faded and became nothing but a dim aura against the back of my hand. I uncovered my eyes to take a look.

Chrysalis was back on the ground again, her wings flapping sporadically and filling the air with their crickety sound. Her horn was still shining, but it was little more than a glow now. She was staring at the ground, and the rocky ground bore faint lines of green fire, drawn across its moss-strewn surface.

By this point it was hard not to assume she'd made those. I sincerely doubted there was any sort of physical reason for a shining horn to draw bright lines of green fire in the quite incombustible ground. There was the possibility that it produced some sort of morbid lighter fluid-like substance and that the horn served to ignite it, but that seemed too far-fetched even for this place.

That left only one answer, which served as the final cornerstone on the grave of my laws of nature.

Magic.

I shivered slightly as she let out a heavy sigh, and hung her head deep down. “I can't do it,” she said, the secondary tone still present but barely audible. “I'd probably doom myself to a slow death if I did, but I can't bring myself to even pretend trying.”

Probably expecting my confusion at this point, she walked up to me. The sadness on her face was nigh impossible to miss, but there wasn't any of it in her voice when she spoke up again. “Hunter, I...need your help. We all

do. The swarm wanes in its hunger. And I believe even our presence is preferable to the unending loneliness of this wasteland you'd face otherwise.”

She placed one of her forelegs on my shoulder – impressive flexibility for a quadruped – and looked me in the eyes. “Feed us.”

-/-/-/-

In the end, all I felt was a bit of asphyxiation that came on sporadically as I performed my little mental exercise, and an ever growing exhaustion that intensified as the minutes went by. That may well just have been sleepiness coming on though – I'd been awake for hell knows how many hours, and performed feats of endurance more fit for an olympian than an aspiring physicist all the while.

After some fifteen minutes of meditating and trying to hold on to various flickers of positive emotions, my trance was broken by a tap on my shoulder. I opened my bleary eyes slowly – I could just about feel the little brush of melatonin that my body managed to produce surging through my blood, urging me asleep – and was met by a smiling face. Not Chrysalis, but one of the minions – hivelings, she'd called them – with its enormous fangs glistening with a lavender sheen. “Don't overdo it,” it said in a cricketing, feminine voice, before turning around and walking off, chitin clattering against the ground.

I glanced in the direction it headed. Chrysalis was on the ground a few meters away surrounded by a bustling green-black mass of hivelings. Most of them were already revitalized and were flying around scouting or just milling about; a few were still standing motionless in a tight-pressed circle around the queen, however. I got to my feet and walked over, to see what she actually did to feed them.

The closest comparison I could think of was a pack of vampire puppies drinking their mother's blood. There were hivelings attached to most every inch of Chrysalis' legs, puncturing them with their fangs and leaving a myriad of cheese-like holes behind. It was no wonder she wasn't standing up – her legs were in absolute tatters. There was no blood, but all of

Chrysalis' lower body had taken a distinctly lavender tone, just like the one I'd seen on the fangs of the hiveling that had waked me up. Thinking about it, I realized it was also the same color as her tears had been – which made sense, if she was to transfer the “emotional energy” or whatever it was they lived off, since that was pretty much what had happened when I drank them. I think.

She gave me a rather reserved look when I came close. The nature of the feeding itself made it look quite morbid to me, but its shape aside it was pretty much alien breast-feeding in action. I couldn't bring myself to look away from the fascinating sight, but I gave her a brief nod. It was fairly obvious she was uncomfortable, but hey, so would I be if my minions were eating my legs.

“Are you feeling well, hunter?” She said at last, after perhaps a minute of rather heavy silence only punctured by the gnawing and cracking sounds of hivelings biting into her chitin and flesh, and the cricketing noises from the wingbeats of the airborne parts of the swarm.

I grinned at how absurd that question sounded, coming from her. “Well, slightly out of breath and sleepy as hell. Not sure how valid that question is though, seeing the shape you're in...”

For the first time since I met her, Chrysalis blushed. Her face went from black to a dark crimson, in a fashion much more extreme than the human expression I was used to. “Oh, silence,” she said, turning her head away.

A few seconds later, the last hiveling departed the little groove worn into the sparse vegetation that covered the ground she'd been lying on. Chrysalis splayed out her limbs and stretched herself like a cat, and in an instant the lavender color faded from her legs, replaced by the black chitin that covered the rest of her. Within moments the holes started closing up, and after half a minute or so of my gaping wonder at her regeneration, only a few of the larger ones on and just above her hooves were left.

Chrysalis gave me a puzzled look as she stood up. “What? You didn't actually believe I was crippling myself feeding my subjects, did you?”

I wasn't sure what to answer, so I said nothing. Eventually, she rolled her eyes and went on, shaking her mane out as she took a few steps on her half-new limbs. "You'd do best to sleep. We'll have much distance to cover tomorrow, I believe, and from what I've heard, feeding changelings has a certain...effect on ponies and such."

She frowned, giving me a long, hard look, as if she just remembered I was, to her, an alien of sorts. "While you're certainly not a pony, you'd best prepare for it anyway. I'm told it has similarities to the aftereffects of alcohol consumption." I grimaced – there were many reasons I hardly ever drank, but taste, cost and hangovers were the three top contenders. "What exactly are you called, hunter? I imagine you're not actually a yeti."

A yawn overcame me as I was about to answer, and my jaws cracked as I bared my own (quite formidable, at least by human standards) fangs to the world. Once the blood rushing through my ears quieted down, I shook my head and settled my eyes against hers.

"I'm a human. My name is Martin Winter, and I am a human."

Soon after, I dug down into my backpack and retrieved my rain gear, along with most of the clothing I'd brought. I didn't have any tent – we'd split 2 over the team, and none of them were mine – and though the hivelings had lit a (green) campfire in the middle of the valley to warm things up, the dew had come on heavy and made most of the ground a cold, damp and wet place. In other words, not one to put my sleeping bag on.

I laid my jacket and pack cover on the ground, right by the eerie light of the bright green fire. The hivelings were settling down all around me, their chitin and wings clicking and cricketing from every angle. I unpacked my sleeping bag and rolled it out on the impromptu sleeping mat I'd made for myself, after which I kitted myself up with 2 extra layers of clothing on top of the 2 I already wore. Finally I grabbed a spare undershirt, and tied its arms around my head – secured fast over my ears it blocked out some of the noise from the camp, but more importantly it would keep them warm.

I unzipped the sleeping bag with some difficulty – moving was pretty difficult with all the extra layers! – and positioned it as properly as I could

atop the jacket and pack cover underneath me. Finally satisfied, I weaseled myself inside its warm nylons, and laid down.

The sky was a bright blue still, although the light was rather weak with the sun shadowed behind the mountain to the west. There were a few clouds running past now, and they were small, spindly things that dashed across the sky quicker than any airplane I'd seen.

At least the skywinds were westerly, which made us leeward with the mountain in the way in case they decided to drop down; a windy, damp night without a tent wasn't a prospect I was looking forward to. Hell, I was lucky enough it was still clear and calm where I was. If there's one thing you can be sure of when you're on high altitude, it's that you can't trust the weather. Sure, Sarek is worse than most places due to its rather special geography, with cold winds blowing in from the north Atlantic, and I had no clue what this would mean for wherever I was at the moment. Still, I had a hunch, and it wasn't a good one. Last year we'd camped the first night outside an abandoned shed by the road, hiding the tent behind it to protect ourselves from both bypassing people and the 30m/s winds.

If things got stormy tonight, I'd be fucking screwed.

Sighing, I gave the sky an angry look before pulling the undershirt over my eyes, fighting my thoughts before they eventually settled down and let me try to sleep.

Before I nodded off, though, I felt a slight impact on the ground beside me. Lifting my blindfold a bit, I lift my head up to see Chrysalis staring into my eyes; the vivid, green orbs of her own slightly translucent in the twilight.

“You are a strange creature, human,” was all she said before lying down beside me. A slight warmth spread through my body, and I thought I could see a hint of green light coming from the mouth of my sleeping bag as I put my blindfold back on.

Chrysalis was soon followed by most of the swarm, and I thought I recognized the one who'd waked me before lying down right by my feet. I imagined it must've looked like some sort of freak herd of alien black

sheep, warming their hideously unprepared shepherd as he slept through the night.

With my unruly thoughts too tired to be coherent I eventually drifted off into sleep, with my backpack on one side and Chrysalis on the other – and everywhere else, the swarm.

Entry #4 - Marty's Misfortune

Marty's Misfortune

Entry #4

1st of July

Location: Changeling camp, at the foot of Jägarfjället (Presumably somewhere around 67°20'N, longitude unknown)

Unclaimed territory in the Icemarks, north of Equestria

The familiar sensations of cold wind, and the heat of bodies curling up against me to shield themselves from it, met me as I woke up. I shivered slightly and decided, as my first conscious thought, to go back to sleep and wait for the weather to calm down. The cold air would not cease buffeting me awake, however, and my efforts to prolong my rest were very soon rendered null and void.

For a few moments as I came to, I lay there pondering why the hell the tent flap was open wide enough to let this much wind in. Or for that part, who the bloody idiot getting up at this hour was. This swiftly became a reflection on the fact that I'd been up late last night, which then turned to an actual recollection of what had happened. Fumbling my hands out of my sleeping bag, I tore off my impromptu blindfold and jolted up, staring at the scene around me.

My backpack was, thankfully, in its normal spot, and didn't seem to have suffered any nightly disaster while I was snoozing. On the opposite side, however, was a changeling. Chrysalis. There were hivelings most everywhere as well, but the entire camp was silent except for the wind. Changelings, it seemed, did not rise early.

Chrysalis was still fast asleep, all stretched out like a dog with her back against me. One of her wings was flared out over my legs, and her hooves

were pawing at the ground in rhythm with her breathing. Her horn was fuming slightly, small green sparks shooting off every other second, and the ground was distinctly warmer where she lay, with a hint of green light coming from underneath the jacket I'd used for a sleeping mat.

I was getting quite envious of that horn of hers by this point.

As I stretched my hand out to nudge her awake, I was stopped by another. Or, well, the hoof of another, at least. "The queen needs rest, hunter. You must not wake her." I recognized the creaky voice as that of the same changeling that had spoken briefly to me yesterday, and I turned to face her.

Recognizing her features was a bit difficult, I admit. There's a bit of difference in facial features and markings, as well as their individual bite marks, but changelings in general are pretty homogenous on the outside. At least to my eyes. In any case she seemed to be the only one else awake in the entire camp, aside from me.

"Uh..." I didn't have much of a clue of the situation at this point, so I just sat and stared at her for a few seconds, eyes wandering to Chrysalis and the surrounding hivelings, then going back to her a few times before settling on the one thing around me that I was familiar with; my backpack. There was, after all, a morning to be made. "Right. I'll just, eat breakfast, then."

I began rummaging through my pack for a change of clothes, and noticed her staring intently at me. I raised a questioning eyebrow at her as I withdrew my spare nylons from one of the side pockets, and began changing inside the sleeping bag to prevent the heat from escaping. Finally I couldn't help but ask.

"What? What's with the stare?"

She perked her ears up and, to my surprise, blinked. Or rather, opened her eyes. For a second the pale blue sheet raised itself to reveal a sparkling green iris, glowing with life and intelligence. Her fangs clicked as she opened her mouth to speak, and her wings fluttered for a moment, raising her from the ground briefly. "I'm...not sure. Your anatomy. It is fascinating. I think."

I snorted as I finished changing, shaking my head at her. “Says you. You’re a member of a species that, in accordance with all the laws of physics I’ve studied so far, and those are quite a few, should not be able to exist. I’m just a human. Oh, wait! Maybe that’s rare around these parts. Conforming to the laws of physics, pah, that is *so* 2005,” I finished, adopting my best attempt at a hipster voice before packing up my trousers and jumping out of the sack, struggling to get my legs inside as fast as possible. Blood and hell, it was cold!

Behind me I heard the changeling stifling a laughter; probably at my ungainly attempts at getting dressed. I grumbled as I finally got my gear into place, and bent down to retrieve my shirts – both the lighter one in bamboo, and the thick, bright red one in fleece I usually reserved for skiing. Today was definitely a day when I needed both, and a jacket.

“You’ve got it easy,” I went on as I straightened up to pull them on, and started buttoning them. “What the hell are you made of, anyway? You don’t even seem to feel this bloody wind. Why don’t you try out being in my suit before you start laughing at me, yeah?” Shaking my head, I unfastened one of the side packs and untied the straps holding the trangia and its fuel bottle in place.

As I rose to look for a spot to set it up, I heard a sound behind me. It was much like the sound you get when you put a lighter over a lit candle, except significantly louder and deeper. My first worry was that the changeling had somehow found the portable speaker in my pack and done something weird to it, but that idea was swiftly blown away when I saw her.

“Vad i-”

Or, rather, what had been her a few seconds ago. In her place was, well, *me*.

“HELVETE-”

I was, however, having obvious problems keeping off the ground. My curse dwindled in my mouth as I gaped and stared at *myself*, somehow managing

to tangle *myself* in *my* shirts as *I* yelped, fell down and buried *my* face in the folds of the backpack.

For a few seconds I stood there just gaping, unable to do anything but make ten thousand random guesses on what the hell was going on. Then I heard the sound again, and *I* was enveloped in a cloud of green flames for a moment, before returning to the shape of the changeling I'd expected to see there from the beginning.

“Ow. Your balance point is weird,” she mumbled through my jacket, which had ended up draped over her snout as she fell. Her wings fluttered to life and propelled her up into the air, and she brushed the jacket off with a hoof, letting it fall down to the ground again.

“I get your point. It does feel cold. You're outside your habitat zone. Aren't you?”

She touched down on the ground again, and cocked her head a bit.

I still couldn't get any words out, and my head was still much too busy wrapping itself around the sheer impossibilities of what had just happened. With the rest of my body out of commission, my stomach promptly took charge.

I let out a loud groan and turned on my heels, storming off with the trangia and my food pack clattering as I stomped my way through the camp. Fortunately the ground wasn't entirely swarmed by the swarm, so I didn't need to step on any hivelings. Half a minute of irate walking later, I sat down on a small rock and began setting up the trangia.

Some minute later the burner was hot, and I was just about ready to put the oats and berries in for the porridge, when I realized I'd made a fatal miscalculation.

I had no water.

Since Sarek was a veritable checkerboard of crisscrossing jokks and reservoirs, all clear as day, there was never any need to carry more than

what you needed at the moment – a fact that took a great deal of weight off your shoulders on any hike, literally. Elsewhere, clean water had a tendency to become a major issue when traveling outside the boundaries of civilization.

This was pretty much the definition of 'elsewhere', and I didn't have a single drop – I'd emptied my water bag crossing the Guhkesvágge, thinking to refill it wherever we made camp. While I'd seen a lot of things since coming down the mountain, running water was definitely not one of them.

For an instant I panicked, my eyes darting around as I looked for a source of water. Then I stopped, and slapped myself in the face, remembering my trip down the mountain yesterday. Most of it had been done on snow.

I turned around to face the slope, but to my dismay it was a fair distance off. The pass I'd came out of was well on the other side of the camp, and there weren't any offshoots of meltwater running down from it as far as I could see. What I did see, however, was the changeling that had been haunting me all morning, standing behind me and looking curiously at me as I stressed around my tiny wilderness kitchen.

She had wings. I decided it was well time for me to start using the perks of these aliens to my advantage. If they were going to use me as a food source, in however odd a way it might be, I'd be damned if I wasn't entitled to some help with my own sustenance in return.

“You.” I grabbed one of the pots, and pointed it at her. She put a hoof to her chin, questioning. “Yes, you. Why are you even asking? I mean, do you see anyone else around here up and walking? Just, look. Can you fly across the camp with this,” I waved the pot around a bit to ensure she knew what I was talking about, “over to the slopes, and fill it up with snow? Pack it a bit if you can, and make sure it's well over the rim. Ait?”

She made a few confused gestures before looking around herself to see what I was talking about, and nodding. “I can,” she replied, and walked up to me, eying the somewhat buckled aluminum pot curiously as I handed it to her.

“There's a good lass,” I said, ruffling her ears a bit when she kept standing there, staring at the pot and the stove it was part of. “Now chop chop, I'd really prefer not to be starving when Chrysalis wakes up. Makes me all grumpy.” At the mention of her queen's name her ears perked up straight and stiff, while I was ruffling them. She nodded again, and drew away from me a bit before taking off.

I have to admit, the speed she got up without any visible exertion at all was pretty impressive. Well above what I can run during any extended period of time, probably in the class of an elite sprinter from what I could discern. I shook my head at yet another of this world's impossibilities, and put the sizzle cap on the burner to save fuel.

Not a minute later I spotted her taking off from the far side of the camp, and she cleared the half-odd kilometer or so in just over half a minute. Quick math gave me an average speed of 60km/h, and seeing the leisure she carried herself (and the pot) with in the air as she flew, it was probably well below her limit. I shivered slightly at the ideas that cropped up in my head as she touched down beside me, and handed me the now snow-filled pot.

Melting the snow took a while, but before long it was thawed enough to start working with. Bits of clumped-up snow still floated around in the pot when I put the oatmeal in, along with some blueberry soup powder for some flavor aside from the salt. Soon enough it was becoming a brown-and-purple bubbling ooze, and I lidded on the burner again to let the porridge set.

While I was cooking the changeling watched eagerly, her eyes all open with the irises glowing green in the morning light. It was fairly hard not to miss, despite my focus on getting my food right – she was standing on the other end of the trangia, and her eyes only let go of it to look at me instead. Finally, she spoke up when I'd finished adjusting the burner.

“What are you doing?”

I snorted in amusement at the obvious answer. “Cooking. I'm making breakfast, like I said.”

She cocked her head, before bowing down and putting her nose to the simmering pot, whiffing it. “Is this...martin food?”

I frowned a bit. “It’s porridge. Oatmeal porridge. With blueberries in it. And I think you meant human food, in which case, yes it is.”

She raised her head again and gave me a confused look. “Human? I thought you said you were Martin?”

I gave her a wide-eyed look before I burst into laughter for a second, shaking my head as I stirred the pot with a spoon. “No, no. That’s my *name*. You’re a changeling, I’m a human. My name is Martin.” I looked up at her in askance. “What’s yours?” I pondered the question for a few moments, looking back at the swarm for a bit, and realized that it might have been slightly improper. “I mean, you do have names, right? It’s not just the queen who gets one, is it?”

The changeling opened and closed her mouth a few times, staring at me with those glimmering green eyes. Finally, she looked away slightly and, to my surprise, blushed.

A few moments of awkward silence passed with me hoping I hadn’t broken some sort of secret changeling rule, before she spoke up. “I...of course we do. It’s just...they’re personal, is all.” She cast her eyes about for a few seconds before shaking her head and looking back at me again. “It’s fine, M-Martin. M-my name is Elytra,” she blurted out, immediately looking away after with an intensified blush covering most of her normally black head.

My eyes remained on her for several seconds, before I sighed and leaned down to grab my cup from the pack. “Well, Elytra. I think the porridge is done. Would you like some?”

Obviously grateful for the change of topic, she nodded profusely and sat down beside me as I prepared to share a meal with an alien for the first time in my life. Probably for the first time in history as well. Think what you may of oatmeal porridge being the ambassador of human food, but in all fairness, it could have been something a lot worse.

Like pickles...

Entry #5 - Among Aliens

Among Aliens

Entry #5

1st of July

In hindsight, I would very much have liked to have experienced this moment at dawn. All in all, it would've been a lot more fitting. Sadly there's no dawn to be had this far north a week after midsummer. I had to make do with the unending light of the sun, as it wandered in and out of the clouds racing across the sky; to and fro behind peaks and slopes, peering out through passes and valleys like the ravengod's solitary eye. As with most things on this journey, however, it could have been a lot, lot worse.

Elytra sat mostly silent by my side as I got my spare cup up and started filling both mine and hers with porridge, a brightly colored spork in each. Why she was quiet, I could guess fairly easily. Odd as it was, she was quite apparently still embarrassed from telling me her name. While it wasn't as obvious as before, her cheeks were still a vivid dark red, and she was avoiding eye contact as far as she could.

Now I don't mind a quiet breakfast, but recent developments – my head hurt just thinking about it – had honestly put my brain into overdrive, and it was only a matter of time before the thoughts I'd been fermenting started spouting out of my mouth unbidden. In the interest of civil conversation, keeping quiet until that point was a very bad idea.

“I guess I don't need to ask why you're called changelings now, huh.”

I handed her the cup, and she took it carefully, cradling the green plastic as if it were a packet of eggs. Maybe that was just the way she held things with those hooves of hers, or maybe it was the first time she'd seen plastic or something. I couldn't tell.

For a second as I handed her the cup, though, our eyes met – and though she immediately turned hers away again, she couldn't help but start stammering back in response. “I- um, th-that is...” She stared at the ground, her blush intensifying again, but if the tone of her voice was any clue it seemed to be more out of shame than embarrassment. “I thought you knew already. I mean, everypony does.“

I stared intently at her until she met my eyes again. “But I'm not any pony, now am I? Listen, Elytra. Wherever this place is, I am way farther from home than you are. Half the laws of nature I know of seem to have kicked the bucket, and the other half have been downgraded to glorified suggestions. Obviously the Law of Conservation of Energy isn't worth the ink on the paper it's printed on here, if what you did back there is any proof.”

I sighed and took my spork in my hand, stirring the porridge a bit. “Okay, okay. That's probably a bit extreme, I guess. It's like, I could probably come up with an adequate explanation for how it could work and still follow most of the laws of physics if I had a few formulas and some time to spare. It's just...”

I trailed off, staring down into my breakfast. Elytra was giving me a concerned look, her blush finally gone for the most part. I shook my head. “Nevermind. Let's eat. And be careful, this stuff is hot.”

I ate in a glum mood, only somewhat dampened by Elytra's confused attempts at handling her spork. In the end she discarded the tool and thrust her snout into the cup, eating straight out of it like a very strange-looking dog.

I gave her a questioning look, and gulped down the half spoonful hot porridge in my mouth to avoid burning myself too badly. “What's up with that? Can't you just, like, transform and eat? I'd burn my face off if I even tried that.”

She looked up at me briefly, before resuming her meal. In a matter of seconds, she'd finished eating, and was licking the blueberry stains off her cheeks. “Inefficient. Use energy to gain the ability to use a slower method

of acquiring energy? That wouldn't make sense." She clacked her fangs and cocked her head at me. "Burn your face? What are your outer shells made of, if they're that vulnerable?"

I raised an eyebrow back at her. "Are we discussing biology now? My *skin* is mostly organic carbon, just like the rest of my body and, I would assume, yours. Shit, right back at you. What the hell is your 'outer shell' made out of? I mean, I'm pretty thick-skinned for a human, but you make me look like a wussy 10-year old brat with a cold. Just how damn temperature-resistant are you guys, anyway?"

A look of confusion settled on her face for a second. "Carbon? Like the ponies? But that's...oh, wait. You have no fur! Now it makes sense." I realized I had to ask more about these 'ponies' sometime, seeing how often they were mentioned. What were they, anyway? Prey? Domesticated? Or yet another sentient species? I shook my head slightly as she went on.

"Our outer shells can protect us from any temperature changes, as long as it doesn't exceed the quicksilver limit. In the cold we can usually stretch it a bit through circulation and keeping the shell warm, but if it goes too deep we'll freeze solid. Most kinds of fire exceeds the quicksilver limit as well, but other than that there's really not much that can harm us."

I frowned. "Quicksilver limit?" Elytra nodded back at me as I resumed eating, as if the term was the most natural in the world. "The freezing and boiling points of quicksilver. Technically it's the 'liquid quicksilver limit', but nobody says that. Some two thirds of our outer shells are made out of elemental quicksilver."

My eyes went wide at that statement, and I sputtered out the spoonful of porridge in my mouth. "*Two thirds quicksilver!?*" Gaping, I recalled my rather dramatic entrance into the camp yesterday, up to the part where I took a fair-sized bite of Chrysalis' body. I gripped my throat. "I ate..."

The calculations went through my head like a myriad of miniature fighter jets. Entirely useless, of course, as I had no numbers and no obvious clues to any of the needed data whatsoever. I looked up and stared Elytra in the eyes, and she heaved a sigh. "I don't know why everypony gets in such a

fuss over it, really. Elemental quicksilver ingestion isn't that dangerous – even if you ate all the quicksilver in a changeling's body, you wouldn't be in much danger. Our shells aren't exactly thick, not that part of them anyway. You'd get more from eating fish."

I kept staring for a few moments, until I decided it wasn't worth going on about. Clearly, she knew what she was talking about – natural, since it was probably a pretty big part of their biology. "Well, how should I know? I'm a physicist, not a chemist. Or a biologist for that matter." Shaking away the small amounts of remaining panic, I resumed eating.

Elytra wouldn't let me eat in peace, however. She had finished her portion, and while she didn't seem up for seconds – not that there was any – she seemed to have worked off most of her embarrassment, and was more talkative than ever. "You? A master of the scientific arts? I thought you were a hunter."

I rolled my eyes and swallowed, gesturing at her with the spork. "Not a master yet. I'm studying for a candidacy at the moment. Mastership comes after that." I took another spoonful, and frowned at her. "You changelings must be fairly advanced, if you've got such detailed understanding of nature as that. How do you know so much about science, Elytra?"

She looked like she was going to speak up, but then her eyes widened and she clamped her mouth shut. I turned around, and saw Chrysalis gliding down toward us, only meters away. At the sight of her queen Elytra was all blushes again, and those matted blue lids snapped shut over her eyes. "We invented it, hunter," Chrysalis crowed as she landed. Judging by her raspy voice, the night hadn't been kind to her. "We invented science, to help understand ourselves, and these monstrously illogical bodies we walk around in."

She trotted up beside us, and fixated me with a stare. "And we taught the ponies our secrets when they asked, thinking we could finally get along with them after so many years of strife and conflict. Oh, they taught us things in return, I suppose, but precious few of those are things we can actually use. Changeling magic isn't unicorn magic, and we have no affinity

for manipulating the weather, regardless of what the pegasi teach us about it."

"And economy? What use do we have of *economy*?" Contempt filled her face as she kicked a pebble, and her eyes followed it as it soared through the air. "We transmute or conjure almost everything our society needs, and you cannot exactly *trade*," she intoned the word as if it was something unnatural, "for astral energy. A sovereign feeds and protects her subjects, and the subjects serve their sovereign. That is how we live, and there is no other way about it." Staring off for a few more seconds, she heaved a sigh, and sat down on her haunches beside me.

I looked at her for a few moments before I continued eating, processing the information I'd received as I sloshed around the porridge in my mouth – there wasn't exactly much chewing involved, porridge being porridge – and after a few seconds of waiting, I looked at her expectantly. "So what happened? I guess you couldn't cope with them after all?"

Chrysalis gave me a glum look. "They panicked when they learned quicksilver was poisonous, and our shells full of it. They purged their cities before we had a chance to explain, and we were exiled from their lands, banned from ever returning."

She smiled at me. "Ironically, the only ponies that have ever died from quicksilver poisoning were the guards responsible for that purge – and this was several centuries ago, mind you. To this day, they still don't know how to handle it properly." I pondered this for a while as I ate, and Chrysalis turned to Elytra. "You must excuse me. I listened in for a bit."

If anything, Elytra's blush deepened, and she fidgeted heavily as she replied. "I-it is your right, highness."

Chrysalis nodded, and a few more moments passed before she spoke up again. "He *named* you?"

She sounded disbelieving, but her eyes only widened when Elytra started nodded profusely. "I-I gave it to him. It felt...right. He named himself, after all." Her lids retracted, and for a brief second she stared into Chrysalis'

emerald eyes with her own. “What choice did I have?” Chrysalis looked thoughtful at this, and diverted her eyes. Elytra noticed me looking at her after a few seconds, and once again her eyelids snapped shut, and she squirmed in embarrassment.

Another minute passed before I had finished eating, and I started putting the trangia back together – I needed to wash it, but that was a later issue. I found Chrysalis staring at me while I was reassembling it, and all she would say in answer was, “It is an interesting device.” It amuses me to think that a species that basically invented natural science in this world would consider a burner and a set of pots an ‘interesting device’, but hey, if there’s one thing I’ve learned here, it’s to never take things for granted. Maybe they don’t have pots? I mean, I didn’t know. Changelings don’t exactly need to cook, do they?

Soon enough I had my things packed up again, and Chrysalis put a hoof to my shoulder. “Come, hunter. We need to speak of things.” I nodded assent – that we needed indeed – and she turned to Elytra. “Wake the swarm.” She popped up into the air immediately, and buzzed off to wake the rest of the camp. Chrysalis watched her go for a second or two, then eyed me. “Shall we?”

She draped her wing around my bare arm – I’d curled them up while eating – and started leading me toward the middle of the ever awakening camp. It was remarkably soft in texture; despite the lack of feathers, I might add. It felt like a blanket of silk. Transparent, green, living silk.

And despite myself, I couldn’t help but wonder how much mercury was in them...

Entry #6 - Marty's Inception

Marty's Inception

Entry #6

1st of July

Okay, a question. Have you ever seen a changeling swarm, all gathered up?

Yeah, well, no, of course you haven't. A parallel: have you ever seen a herd of reindeer, wild horse, or some other type of large animal?

It's not like a pack of lions or wolves, who mostly just laze about in a spread-out, leisurely manner, yet retain that impression of being ready to pounce at a moment's notice. Nor is it like a school of fish or a flock of birds in flight, who instinctively assume advanced formations and patterns, moving in precise maneuvers with impressive coordination.

A herd of reindeer is like a giant, quadruped class of 5th-graders on a field trip. Their numbers are immense, and while some of them constantly mill about to some extent they always follow their leader like a comet's tail. When someone finds something interesting or stumbles upon a possible threat, the herd stops up, and a massive barking frenzy ensues. The herd gathers up, and action is taken.

A changeling swarm is much similar, except that they move much faster, look generally more intimidating and can fly. Overall this tends to give you the impression that you're about to get assaulted by an army of angry mutated bees. When lidded, their eyes aren't terribly expressive, which tends to give them a fairly angry look – much like myself, actually, but as I've stated before I blame that on my eyebrows...

As I followed Chrysalis back from my little breakfast alcove, Elytra evidently made good on her word – the camp went from silent to a buzzing

mass of activity in very short order. We had a ways to walk, though, so I decided to make use of my time.

“So, Chrysalis. These ponies you keep talking about.” Chrysalis snorted in disapproval, and gave me an irritated look. “Hey, don't give me that. Know thy enemy, and all that, you know? I'm just trying to get my bearings, and given how much you reference them I need to know what I'm dealing with.”

She did not relent in her disapproval, but she did tell me about the ponies. With a heavy touch of disdain in her voice, and at several points going into that split-tone that sent shivers up my back, but she was efficient. The ponies lived to the south in their realm of Equestria, and they were a herbivorous species with a nation somewhere in the middle of its earliest trod into industrialization. The different races were divided into a clear caste structure, a remnant of ancient pony culture Chrysalis could not date her knowledge of, but she guessed it at somewhat short of two thousand years. When I voiced a comment about her species' historians being so detailed, she gave me a strange look.

“The ruler of a Hive passes on the sum of her knowledge – and her predecessors' – to their successor. Even if she has been felled in battle, the memories can be recovered. That does tend to jumble them a bit, though, which is why we don't always have all the details in the right order when it comes to the ancient world. There has always been a fair bit of conflict between us and the ponies.”

This revelation impressed me to quite some degree, but Chrysalis appeared eager to be done with her little talk, so she hushed me down and kept on talking. Pegasi composed most of the military caste, and the civilians used their natural magic at keeping the weather in check. They'd even built a city out of clouds.

The unicorns had magic – of course, nowhere close to what Changelings had, Chrysalis scoffed in contempt – and had originally been a caste of nobles and knights. Over the course of two millennia this had of course changed a fair bit, but there were a few noble houses remaining, and by far the majority of all bureaucrats and craftsmen were unicorns.

The workers' caste was, to my surprise, not yet another kind of variant on a mythical being, but rather quite humble beings called "earth ponies". They apparently had some sort of magic in them that made them sturdier and stronger – and far more fertile – than the other races. Other than that, and their strange ability to grow crops far better than any other being on the planet, they seemed to me to be fairly like the horses I was used to.

Colorfulness aside, of course. The image of a typical earth pony that Chrysalis conjured up for me almost had me gagging at its garish pink coating.

Chrysalis had an obvious distaste for unicorns, for stealing their secrets and banishing them among other things and she had far too many memories of being impaled by a pegasus' spear to have anything but grudging respect for their skill in battle. That was a point which I could quite understand, although I found it quite morbid that she had the first-hand memories of her ancestors' deaths in her head.

Her hive had shared a border with the lands of the earth ponies for a long time, however, and while trust had been scarce, they'd always been willing to do business. The whole Quicksilver Pact business had come about when a bunch of confused unicorn officials started inquiring about how the earth ponies had discovered fertilizer, and soon realized their estranged neighbors might be a bit more knowledgeable than themselves.

She was about to start telling me of their *ruling caste* – she spoke the very word with a big mouthful of contempt, and hurriedly clarified that among *changelings* there sure as night were no silly restrictions on who could bear a hivelord's crown – but she didn't come further than a brief visual description before she realized, from the buzzing din of the swarm gathered all around us, that we'd arrived at our destination. "I'll explain more later, hunter," she offered over the noise, and I nodded absentmindedly as I started to file and process the enormous amount of information I'd just received.

Thus, I was not paying the greatest heed to what the changeling queen said in her loud, booming, two-tone voice, speaking to her subjects in a quite properly majestic manner that any king would've been proud of. I heard my name – or the term "hunter", at least – and stood up straight and nodded,

gesturing gracefully to the crowd they stomped their hooves and stars know what else to make that clattering noise, signaling approval. I was confused for a moment, but it didn't take me more than a few seconds to decipher that she was thanking me for rescuing them. Satisfied with knowing what was going on for the moment, I went back to filing my thoughts.

As one might expect after an experience like this, there were quite a lot of those. I'm not an overly absent-minded person per se, but I have over the years developed an extraordinary ability to ignore people. It does help me focus to some extent, of course, but the core purpose of it remains the same. Because of this, I was rather surprised when I found that the world had gone mostly silent around me, and I stood almost alone in the middle of the camp, tugging my beard. Almost alone, of course, meant that Chrysalis and a handful of hivelings were gathered around me in a loose semicircle, staring at me and whispering to each other.

Seeing me out of my reverie, or as I realized was more likely, *feeling* it – the fact that they fed on emotions, and the very distinct experience I'd had the day before, had made me fairly certain they could easily detect changes in a person's mind – the group closed on me swiftly. Chrysalis took the lead, of course, but I could now easily discern Elytra from the others, even with her eyes lidded. A bit too easily for my comfort, actually. It was almost as if...

I managed to snatch up a few of their murmurs as they were making their way towards me, confirming my hunch. These changelings were all males; unless deep voices and angular faces was the marking of something entirely different, of course, but that seemed far-fetched even to me. I hadn't been expecting sexual dimorphism in a species like this – come to think of it, I'm not sure I had been expecting them to have any sort of genders at all. Before I could follow that train of thought for very long, though, the ring of changelings closed on me, and Chrysalis stepped forward to face me.

“Hunter,” she began, and then paused, quite apparently not sure how to proceed. That did not bode well. “There are things we must...um. Speak of.” By now her eyes were shifting visibly, and that worried me just as much as the sheer fact that she had stayed behind at all.

“Things, you say,” I said with a raised eyebrow. “Stop dodging around the point you’re trying to make, says I. It’s quite apparent on your face that it’s bad news. What is it, *Chrysalis*. Tell me.”

Oddly enough all of the males around her blushed faintly when I uttered her name, but the queen herself didn’t even seem to notice for all her fidgeting. Finally she closed her eyes and blurted out. “It’s about the matter of your, transportation.”

I blinked. Twice.

After a few seconds, I managed a reply. “My what?”

With most of the confusion having been pushed over on me, Chrysalis apparently felt quite a bit less pressured by the situation. “Well. You can’t fly.”

I raised my other eyebrow (or really, lowered the first one seeing as I’d had them both up to my hairline in surprise previously) and gave her a deadpan look. “Oh, really? You managed to draw that conclusion? And here I clearly thought the laws of physics were flexible enough for me to take off if I just flapped my arms a bit and *believed*, or something.” I spat at the word, and shook my head. “No, I can’t fly. What exactly are you proposing to do to solve that problem? *Carry me?*”

She glanced around at the hivelings flanking her, as if she only now realized this might not have been a very viable idea. “Well, I— Yes! What did you think we’d do? *Walk?*” She sounded completely flabbergasted at the prospect of using her hooves for actual movement. Okay, maybe a bit harsh considering we’d just walked clean across the camp, but that’s not really a fair comparison to make.

For one, I wasn’t going to let this argument drop. It wasn’t any stupid issue of pride, either. Though I suppose I wouldn’t take much of it in being hauled around like a sack of grain in the air by a quartet of – stallions? Is that term even applicable here? – I was more concerned with the problem of *crashing*.

“I would exactly that, indeed. No, seriously, you don't seem to understand the problem here. *Physics*. As far as I can tell, no matter how badly wrenched the laws of nature have been in this place, I still weigh about the same. Either gravity hasn't changed, or the size of whatever planet we're on is bigger than mine by the same ratio it's been altered, so it doesn't matter.”

I walked up to her now – I had my hunches, but I hadn't exactly done empirical research on this yet. There hadn't been much time. Hunches, however, have always been one of my strong points.

Taking a firm grip with one hand under both wings, I hoisted Chrysalis into the air like a three-year old kid, and held her there. It barely took any effort at all – she weighed almost nothing at all.

“Whatever screwed-up material your bodies are made out of to make them this light, it only emphasizes the fact that you need to be like this to fly. I'm imagining there's a pretty thin balance point, as well – you might be able to take wing with double, or perhaps even three times that weight, but that's it.”

I put her down gently, and gestured to myself once my hands were free. “I'm not the best at winging guesses like this, but I wager I am about twenty or thirty times your weight.” There was a small gasp throughout the small crowd, and Chrysalis' eyes widened considerably. “And that's just mass. You'd also have to worry about finding centers of gravity as a unit and flying closely together without blocking each others' wings, and so on. Split it evenly and you *might* be able to carry me with some twenty or thirty changelings, but how would you propose to do that? Inverse dogpile? There's not close to enough surface on my body to split up between thirty equal weight points, nevermind that you'd also have to have thirty pairs of wings coming out of that for things to make any sense. And if it comes to walking, my own boots work just fine for me – I don't need a sedan chair made out of two dozen hivelings. You're not carrying me, and that's final. It – is – physically – impossible.”

I was a bit surprised when Chrysalis turned to her minions with a look on her face that very much said *I told you so*, but one could guess that a queen of her kind would need quite a bit of political savvy to survive. Either she

had actually anticipated the outcome – quite possible seeing how reluctant she seemed at the start – or she'd just been smart enough to plan ahead for it. Or so I figured.

The males grumbled for a bit, but not before long they were joining the rest of the hive in what I guessed was their preparations for breaking camp. Whatever that might be – changelings don't exactly use a lot of equipment...

“I suppose we will be hoofing it, then,” Chrysalis said with a heavy sigh.

I nodded, not a little grateful that I'd be spared getting hoisted into the air without a single reliable engine under me. “I'm sorry for the trouble, I guess,” I said in a relieved tone. “I'm not sure if they'd even gotten off the ground, but I didn't want to take the risk. I may have exaggerated the figures a little, but the fact remains that you couldn't possibly lift me like that. I guess this means we won't be moving as fast as you'd planned, though. Just how far...”

I wasn't sure what I was going to ask. I probably didn't have much option but to go with them – I sure couldn't survive too long on this mountain, whatever equipment I had with me. Still, I'd be leaving behind the possibility of finding a way back to my own world where I'd found the entrance, and that didn't make me feel good at all. For all the fact that I was still reasonably safe and sound, with starvation and death not seeming too close at the moment, and that I'd found company, however odd, it didn't change the fact that there were seven of my closest friends and kinsmen back there – at least, I thought and hoped they were still there – with no clue where I was, and all of Sarek to search.

It would hardly have mattered had I even been there. Sarek is about the size of Stockholm County, except that instead of the largest city in Scandinavia and its suburbs, the civilization in Sarek amounts to two bridges and absolutely nothing else. Searching that for one man you don't know the location of is next to impossible on foot, and bloody difficult enough in a helicopter.

If I knew my companions well, they'd stay put for a while and try to look for me in the area, before moving out and reporting me as a missing person

to the police. Being declared dead wouldn't sit well with me, but as it was I didn't exactly have much choice in the matter.

As I furrowed my eyebrows in brooding, Chrysalis answered my unfinished question. "We're not sure. The scouts I've sent haven't reported any landmarks I can place, and as you can imagine it's very difficult to make any decent estimate of distance when you're hurtling uncontrollably through the air. Our flight from Canterlot wasn't very...merciful. We may have lost a number to the landing alone – I'm not sure how I survived the impact myself."

She frowned for a moment, her eyes going to the ground, but then shook her head and looked up to me again. "My guess would be four or five flights to Canterlot, and from there it's another four to Hive Orion at the border. Hive Hermaima-Allagion and the Basileo is less than a flight from there." I raised a confused eyebrow at her – those measurements told me absolutely nothing – and she sighed. "I don't know how much that means to you. If it helps, a flight is what we normally cover in a day, or six hours of straight flying."

That did help indeed. It probably wasn't entirely accurate, but going from the estimate I had on Elytra, six hours straight flying at 60km/h summed up to 360 kilometers. It seemed like a reasonable distance, and I had no trouble seeing a changeling going at that speed for maybe twice as long.

What it also did, however, was make me feel rather disheartened. On a good day's hike I could perhaps manage 25 kilometers without pushing myself too much, assuming the terrain was reasonably flat. By sheer virtue of existing, I had made the changelings' journey home more than tenfold longer. I groaned and buried my face in my hands. "Fuck my life," I muttered irritably to myself, but it was more an attempt to avoid thinking of just how much I was screwing up right now.

I was about to – well, I'm not sure actually, but I felt incredibly stupid and whatever I could've done then would've been so as well – when a third voice spoke up. Much to our surprise; both me and Chrysalis had managed to completely forget about Elytra, who'd been standing right behind her queen all along.

“Um. Martin. There is... another option.”

I lowered my hands a bit and gave her a look. Chrysalis looked absolutely spooked, for that part. “What do you mean, another option?”

Her tone was slightly accusing, and Elytra flinched slightly at her words. “I m-mean...m-m...”

She stood there for a moment stuttering, and hesitating, before she raised her eyelids and stared at us both wide-eyed. “Melding. I know how to do it. It would work.”

I had lowered my hands and settled them at my hips while she'd been speaking, but Chrysalis completely dropped her jaw at Elytra's words. “*Melding*? Are you insane, hiveling? How do you even know of such a thing? It has been *centuries* since the last time we dared try that on anypony!”

To my great surprise, Elytra raised her head, confronting Chrysalis eye to eye. “Because of the political implications. I may not have my entire line's history. But I have some of it. Important parts. This certainly is one.” She shifted her eyes to me, and pointed at me with her hoof. “And Martin isn't any pony. He is Martin. So I will do it.”

Chrysalis was completely stunned – she just blinked when Elytra pushed her aside to make her way towards me. “Uh,” I said hesitantly, not sure what to say. Eventually, I managed to blurt out, “What exactly are you doing? Elytra?”

Not that it did much good. Elytra ignored me just as much as she had Chrysalis, and when she reached me she reared up on her hindlegs, her wings flapping slowly to keep her balanced. At this point, she apparently encountered a problem – I was too tall. Even on her hindlegs, she only reached up to my chest. So she fixated me with a stare, and suddenly her voice chimed in twain, like Chrysalis had earlier. “**Kneel.**”

This finally broke me out of my reverie, and I raised an annoyed eyebrow as I stared down at her. This seemed to break a bit of her crazy focus as

well, because when she spoke again, her voice was back to normal. “Oh. Or, um, I guess you could lift me. Um.” I rolled my eyes, but hoisted her up into the air anyway. She squeaked a bit as I gripped her sides, but other than that didn’t protest too much. I mean, she asked for it, so why should she – but you never know with women. Or mares, or whatever.

After hanging in the air for second or two, Elytra’s horn flared up in a dazzling array of colors, and I thought I could see something through them as they danced before my eyes. Then, she flapped her wings once, and her horn touched my forehead – or so it should have. However, instead of the pain you get from being poked with a sharp object, all I felt was a slight tingling; a second after, the colors flared like a kaleidoscope of suns and blinded my eyes.

It felt like someone was pouring a glass of water into my skin. A cold, rippling sensation wove its way through my head and spread throughout my body, surrounding every nerve cell in a moment’s embrace before moving on. When it reached my fingers and toes it *turned*, and all of a sudden it was a feeling of warmth instead. It reached my back, and it felt like someone was drawing on my skin with a burning coal for just a moment – then it was all but gone, and everything settled back into my head, with just a slight tingle behind my back to remind me that something was still there.

I was just about to try opening my eyes again, when–

Hello, Martin.

Elytra’s voice rung through my head, and I tore my eyes open despite the pain – but all I could see was Chrysalis, staring at me with her eyes and mouth both open as wide as they could possibly go.

I’m in here.

It was all too apparent what she meant by “in here,” and it was only by sheer luck that I managed not to faint from shock when she said it.

Heavens know what would’ve happened if I had...

Entry #7 - Flight

Flight

Entry #7

1st of July, 08:33

Airspace above SW slope of Jägarfjället

2090m ASL

Temperature 10° C, Wind Speed 17 m/s S-SE

In a sense, one could say we weren't actually flying. Leastwise, we weren't flying in the sense of moving through the air; if anything, we were unnaturally still, perhaps even more so than one could manage on the ground.

These thoughts did nothing to change the fact that I was airborne, of course, and thus did nothing at all to alleviate my oncoming panic attack. I was hanging in the air some twenty meters above ground, kept so by the massive green-black blob of magic attached to my back that was Elytra, and I had absolutely no control whatsoever over anything at all.

“You're going to get us both killed!” I yelled furiously into the wind. Not that I had to, what with Elytra being able to hear my every thought – normally, that would've been the more disconcerting issue, but right now my priorities laid elsewhere – but it didn't quite seem like she'd grasped the concept of acrophobia. Or vertigo. I like to think that I got rid of my fear of heights the summer I turned 12, but this morning had proved that assumption fatally wrong.

“Ash and despair take you, hunter, calm yourself!” Chrysalis was at my side, wings beating furiously to avoid being swept away by the wind like so much dust, and her twain-split voice strained to make itself heard. “It is

simple levitation magic! It is perfectly safe, and with you as an anchored power source she can maintain the spell for stars know how long! You said yourself that you wouldn't have any problems with flying! What of keeping your word!?"

The wind in my ears made it hard to hear any possible hints of worry in her voice, but since the moment we'd taken off, Elytra hadn't said a word. That, if anything said its own about just how "simple" levitation magic was, at least to her. "I don't care! If I'd known this was what you meant by *flying*, then I'd never agreed to it in the first place! Hell, I'd rather be carried around by a dogpile of hivelings than float around like some bloody magic balloon like this! For the last time, *get me down!*"

Chrysalis seemed about to retort when I finally started to sink, and a massive surge of gratitude for Elytra rushed through my head. At that, our descent started wobbling a bit; worse, though, I could *feel* the embarrassment sweeping through her like a wildfire, and it took all my self-control to not let it simply mirror over to myself. Sharing your head with someone is not the simplest thing in the world, but doing so with a transforming alien who possibly holds less than platonic feelings for you is a bloody nightmare. I've never been fast on the uptake when it comes to realizing stuff like that, I admit, but the bluntness with which those emotional surges hit me was like getting smashed in the face with a hot frying pan, except the frying pan made you giddy and red-faced for an entirely different reason than concussions and third-degree burns. I was definitely not going to tell her I'd figured it out, either; that would have us both faint on the spot for sure, and seeing as we were probably going to spend a considerable amount of this day in the air, that would probably be the most stupid thing I could possibly do.

That was, if we could actually get off the ground in a manner that didn't have me in a fit of panic.

As my feet touched the ground I heaved a sigh of relief, and I heard it mirrored behind me by Elytra. Her cocoon of solid magic had broken up, and she was now back to her usual form. Or, well, half of it, at least.

As the name implied, Elytra's "melding" magic had effectively merged us together – body and soul, fluidly meshing together like water into a sponge. In this case, I was the sponge and she was the water – my body was more or less the same, except for the addition of a variably sized changeling sticking out of my back. Elytra, meanwhile...

I don't know where to start, really. Her explanation was that she had transformed her body into astral energy, which she stored inside of me somehow. Like a genie in a bottle; except I was the bottle.

"Are you okay, Martin?" I couldn't see the concerned look on Elytra's face, but I didn't exactly need that to know it was there. After all, I'd *felt* her concern for me, even before she had spoken. It was very unnerving.

Before I could answer, though, Chrysalis swooped down on us, with a disapproving glare on her face. "This is getting us nowhere, Hunter! If we cannot have you fly with us, all of this will be for nothing! Stop whimpering about and get up there—"

She didn't get any further. Elytra literally popped out of my back with snakelike speed, swirling around me and thrusting her face at Chrysalis, stopping mere centimeters away from her nose. "Chrysalis!" I thought the queen's eyes were going to pop at being addressed like that by one of her subjects, but it didn't stop there. "He is not of an airborne species! Tethering him along like a piece of cloud will only frighten him, and he has told you so already! Apologize!"

For several seconds, Chrysalis stood dumbstruck, staring wide-eyed at her; not until Elytra gave a snort and wound herself back into my body again, leaving only a tiny black spot on my neck, did the queen break out of her reverie. I thought I heard her mutter something about *osmosis*, but she shook her head and gave me a quite abashed look. "I...um. She is right. I'm sorry, Hunter. It is hard to keep in mind all of the...differences, sometimes." She gestured vaguely to my body with a hoof, and shook her head again. "It has always been one of the harder things for us changelings. We can adapt to almost anything – it is sometimes hard for us to imagine how it is to lack that ability. I apologize, Hu– Martin. It was inconsiderate of me."

Some ten minutes later, we were reconciled and had devised a good plan of getting me stably in the air as easily as possible. At least, I thought it was a good plan. While my changeling companions understood at least some of the principles involved – the more magical ones they hopefully grasped better than I did – they were not quite as certain as I was that my idea would actually work.

“I don't understand the issue, really. Levitation magic, however applied, counteracts gravity, yes? Even if you reduce the field efficiency by not enclosing the space it's generated in, however that works, it will still be enough to reduce the total load by a significant amount. With my weight reduced, I should have no problem keeping myself airborne given the wingspan we'll be using. You don't need to be an engineer to understand that.”

Elytra and Chrysalis both stood in front of me, a small string of shapeless black connecting the hiveling's body to mine. She'd explained – transferred her memories, more like – a few of the key concepts when I'd asked her, but she'd been very wary about my idea of how to apply them. Apparently both changelings and pegasi, the airborne pony race, used a more arcane connection to the air itself to fly – I got a blinding headache when Elytra tried to show me what she knew of how it worked – rather than simply counteracting the forces of nature with magical power, as I was proposing.

Put simply, Elytra would transmute her body into a pair of rather enormous wings on my back, and then use her magic to generate enough lift that my weight would be low enough to actually let me fly with them – while, since she didn't actually have to make me weightless, saving a lot of energy compared to the previous method of magical ballooning.

All in all, I was to be a slightly more sophisticated, slightly more magical and hopefully slightly more reliable Icarus.

Hoping that changelings had no tendency to melt in the sun they hadn't told me about, I battered down the doubts of the opposition and told my companions quite bluntly to just get on with it.

Chrysalis gave me a scornful look, before setting her wings aflutter and rising a few meters off the ground. Her eyes definitely had a curious glint in them, though; she was just as interested in what would happen as I were. While it of course was quite a fascinating thing to think of being able to fly of (mostly) my own power, formulating theories based on magical antigravity and applying them in the field was something different entirely. Magic, applied as science. Quite extraordinary.

Elytra just sighed a bit, shook her head, and looked me in the eyes; I could feel her concentration as if it were my own, and it focused my own senses as well. Lidding her eyes, she took a leap up into the air, wings beating furiously; her horn blazed with emerald fire, and an aura of green light washed over me. It wasn't bright enough to blind, me, though. I watched as the fire spread across the length of her horn to envelop the base and then her entire head, and within moments the black length of wispy matter that connected us was blazing green as well. I felt a sharp pain across my shoulders, spreading from the spot on my neck where our bodies connected. Only pain, at first, but then giving way to awareness and sensation. New neural pathways were being forged, not of one of our bodies but of both, and I could feel them as well as she could.

The fire had started consuming Elytra, now; she was just a green inferno to my eyes, now, every spark and wisp of bright-green smoke gathering behind me and latching on, growing. The part of me that was still trying to be rational feared for her safety – after all, from what I could see it looked very much like she was being burnt to a crisp – but inside my head I felt her presence, a thing of sharp focus and intent, and I'm fairly certain I would've noticed if she was burning to death.

Meanwhile the part of me that wasn't busy trying to rationalize things once again decided to be an asshole. "You know, I'd appreciate it if you could make them, you know, not green and fleshy. I don't think I'd look very good as a damn fairy." I laughed slightly when a spike of irritation shot up from Elytra, but the next second the pain intensified to a biting sharpness, and irritation was joined by the hot mirth of successful revenge. I grit my teeth when the last wisps of flame dissipated into drifting smoke, leaving the

afterimage of its last, shining glare hanging on to my retinas as the searing pain in my back started slowly fading away.

“Well,” Chrysalis crowed from her spot on high, “you certainly look the part, at least. A big, ugly bird, but a bird nonetheless.”

I looked over my shoulder, and my heart almost skipped a beat. A pair of absolutely gargantuan wings grew out of my back, lined like a magpie's in black and white. They were easily longer than I was – which was just what I had planned for, but seeing it made quite a difference – with a total wingspan just short of five meters, each wing over two meters in length. The feathers – well, they were feathers, at least – seemed to have been added as an afterthought, impossibly long things that didn't quite seem to cover everything they were supposed to. Elytra obviously could tell I had noticed, or had already come to the same conclusion as I had, because her voice went through my head just as I laid my eyes on them. *Well, sorry, but you asked for it. I don't usually do feathers.*

I assured her that it was all fine – given what the changelings' wings look like, my expectations on the visual department of this experiment had been rather low. Sure, they fit rather well on their bodies, in a morbid, insecty sort of way, but I hadn't been looking forward to incorporating that sort of architecture into my own body very much. Besides, improvements could be made later. Now, it was time to see if my theory actually worked.

Which, of course, first involved me getting acquainted with the entirely new set of muscles plugged into my back. Elytra was considerable help, of course, both with the wing muscles themselves as well as the concept of handling new body parts – being a shapeshifter, she had quite a bit of experience in that area, after all. Still, it took well more than half an hour before I could even start moving them properly on my own, without Elytra nudging my fumbling attempts at directing the brand new neurons in the right direction.

Chrysalis busied herself with gathering the swarm up for takeoff, and had one hiveling bundle up my sleeping gear and cram it all back into my pack somehow. I have no idea how he did it, but the fellow looked fairly smug when he dropped it off, as tightly strapped as it had been when I took it off.

This of course made yet another problem evident, namely that I hadn't quite taken into account that I'd be carrying my own luggage on the flight, and thus hadn't quite remembered to ensure that the wings would need to be unobstructed by a 80-liter hiking backpack, besides everything else.

Thankfully this turned out to be a rather simple matter to solve; Chrysalis gave the straps of my burden a short look, before giving the construction a slight magical restructuring that allowed me to wear it without impairing my still-theoretical ability to fly. It did feel rather strange on my back – and rather crowded in a fuzzy sort of way, despite the changes – but it didn't feel like it was chafing anything at all. Anyone who's done walking of any kind knows that this is a big deal indeed, and for a hiker it's even more so.

Eventually, I reached the conclusion that practice on the ground could only take me so far, and unslung the pack from my back. There was no sense in bringing it on a test run – it was extra weight, for one, and if I wound up crashing on my first attempt there'd be nothing gained from having all my gear subjected to disaster as well. I gave a look to Chrysalis, who was once again up in the air nearby, and she gave me a confident nod.

“Okay, Elytra. Fire 'em up.”

A high-pitched hum started sounding behind me, and turning my head a bit I could see the tips of my wings – *my wings!* – glowing faintly. More importantly, I felt the pull of the earth lessen in intensity, bit by bit, until I could swear I could jump higher than an astronaut on the moon. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath; another, crouching down, then one more. Then, finally, I unfurled my wings, raised them as far as they could go...

Tense as a coiled spring, I drew one last shuddering breath, before leaping up and hammering the wings down as hard as I could in one motion.

Just like that, I took my first, determined wingflaps, and flew.

And just like that, a few seconds later, I realized that I may have been overcompensating a little, once I saw just how fast the world was actually flying by. “How do I slow down!?” Unfortunately there wasn't anyone to hear my desperate cry, since I'd left the entire swarm gaping in the dust of

my dramatic takeoff. Elytra was more than aware of our plight, however, and her voice rung through my head. *I told you this was a bad idea!*

And as usual, the only part of me that managed to get any sort of hold of itself was the smartass part. “But it's not! It's an absolutely wonderful idea! It's not that it isn't working, it's that it's working way too bloody well! CAN YOU STOP US FROM GOING INTO ORBIT NOW!?”

That may have been somewhat of an exaggeration, but hell knows that I didn't exactly have much to compare with at the moment. Nevertheless, moments later I felt gravity's hold on me tighten, and our rapid ascent smoothed out into a soft glide before long. “Good, very good. Note to self, not quite so much power in the takeoff.” My voice was a bit unsteady, but I made no real attempt to control it. I had other things to worry about. “Note to Elytra, perhaps a little less antigravity would be a good idea. Also, you might want to teach me a bit of—“

I looked down. Far below, the mountains were spread out like porcelain on a dinner table, and wisps of cloud streaked by at a rather frightening speed. I gulped, and set my eyes to stare at the sky once more. “...How to fly this thing. Like you said, I'm not of an airborne species...”

Slowly but surely we started making our way downward in a long, gentle spiral, as Elytra went through the very basics of how to fly with a pair of wings in my head, throwing images and memories at me as fast as I could manage to grasp them while keeping our descent under a reasonable amount of control. It took a minute or two before I spotted Chrysalis, furiously beating her wings as she thrust through the air like a spear, if not quite as fast as the very realistic imitation of a humanoid cruise missile that I'd just performed.

Relief entered her face as she saw I was all fine, but was quickly replaced by stern disapproval. Rolling slightly in the air, she fell in beside me on my groundward course and opened her mouth. I wasn't quite in the mood for another lecture, however, so I waved dismissively at her with my hand, and shook my head. “Yes, I know, and I'm not going to do that again! Probably! But at least we know it works now, don't we?”

She gave me a sullen glare, before letting her eyes wander across my back – and the whole length of my wingspan – with a considering look on her face. “I suppose we do!” She looked me in the eyes, before gesturing downward with her hoof and angling her wings slightly to the side. “I’ll see you on the ground, Hunter!”

My stomach fell as I watched her plummet into a sharp dive, and a nervous grin made its way onto my lips. “We’re not doing that,” I said as much to myself as to Elytra, and shook my head sternly. “We are *not* doing *that*!”

On and on, we kept spiraling downward, until I finally started recognizing the myriad of black shapes below me as changelings, drawing closer and closer a bit faster than I had thought. A bit too late I realized that I probably should have asked for a more detailed walkthrough on how to land, but by the time that thought finished going through my head I was already flaring my wings to bleed excess velocity and making my final approach on the straight line below me I’d designated as my landing strip. Drawing to mind the way I’d run down the mountain and out the pass yesterday, I clenched my teeth and started whirling my legs up to speed.

The touchdown was not quite as heavy as I’d expected – Elytra was still powering her levitation magic on us, after all – but I stumbled like I’d been shot nonetheless. In my defense, it actually took several seconds of mad dashing before I actually crashed; and that was only because once again, Chrysalis had gotten the bright idea of putting her swiss-cheese frame right where it wasn’t supposed to be.

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled nasally into her flank as I tried to get up, but Elytra’s magic had screwed up my sense of balance something horrible. All I managed was making the heap of wings and limbs even more tangled.

“It’s, fine.” Chrysalis moaned between her words, clearly in a lot more pain than I was, but at least she was coherent, unlike last time. Then, to my surprise, she chuckled, making my nose bounce against her flank like a woodpecker’s beak. “I did say I’d see you on the ground.”

I groaned at her misplaced sense of humor, before Elytra finally let her magic go and I could start untangling myself from the queen – and having

an extra pair of limbs to go about it did absolutely nothing to help me in that effort.

Entry #8 - To Know A Vale

To Know A Vale

Entry #8

1st of July, 19:50

Airspace, approximately 500km SW of Jägarfjället

3000m ASL

Temperature 6° C, Wind Speed 10 m/s E

“And what, that's how they invented the whole memory-magic thing? How long ago? They certainly didn't look anything like you fellows – they were unicorns, weren't they?”

Elytra huffed at me – inside my head, of course, but the sound was still pretty much the same – and I felt disapproval radiate from her corner of our minds. It was really 'ours', at this point – it was like having a roommate you couldn't get rid of, in a way. You had your own things and your own thoughts to care about, but whatever one did the other could see; or in our case, feel.

You're asking too many questions, too fast, came her response. First you're not interested, and now that I've shown you a bit you suddenly want to know everything at once? I would question the mechanics of your mind, were I not already a part of it. With a marked silence her presence withdrew from mine, as much apart as we could come. There'd be no more conversation on the matter of ancient changeling history today, it seemed.

I snorted irritably. Like it or not as she may, she had gotten my interest, and when it comes to knowledge – and stories! – I'm greedy to a fault for more.

Waiting wouldn't exactly hurt, though. It wasn't as if we had a lack of time to spend. We'd managed to cover just over a flight and a half during the day, but none of the scouts – or Chrysalis herself – had found any landmarks at all they could recognize, and that in itself told quite a bit about how far we still had to go.

In a way, I was getting used to flying. I'd spent some time with Elytra calibrating her spell to a perfect power level just after takeoff, and two hours in I was remarkably enough feeling quite natural in the air. It was a bit like skiing, in a way – you read the air currents much like you'd read the snow, looking for bumps and drops and smooth parts. We'd taken a short breather at a mountaintop around five o'clock, but aside from that we'd spent the whole time since ten in the air. Some of the changelings were looking a bit winded – haha, get it – which was understandable, since from what Chrysalis had told me they were only used to six hours of flight per day, aside from the scouts. I, on the other hand, felt none worse for the wear, and I would certainly have noticed Elytra getting tired. Not so strange, maybe, since for all intents and purposes we were a magical fighter jet in a pack of birds, but it felt nice to know I wasn't being a burden, despite having been just your average flightless human half a day ago.

However, much like most forms of long-range travel, even flying lost its novelty once you'd kept at it for long enough. Sure, I could still marvel at the sights of the landscape below me, but in all honesty it hadn't been changing very much. Valleys and mountains and little rivers and lakes were sprinkled across the land like sugar on a donut, and there really weren't much else. This was one single enormous mountain range, as far as I could tell. Emphasis on enormous; we weren't flying all too high up, staying in the valleys we found for good winds for the most part, but despite all the distance we'd covered I had seen no signs of it ending – be it for a bigger forest of some kind, or a coastline.

On the other hand, Elytra didn't even have the novelty of flying to break the dull monotony of travel, and she had quickly gotten the worst of our collective boredom. Thus, she started her interrogation. Now, I'm not denying that it was probably intended as an attempt at small talk, but as you can imagine that isn't really the most common skill for hivelings in general

– much less one with Elytra's leanings. So began a very odd spin on the theme of *the kid who gets invited into the cockpit*.

In the beginning it'd been simple questions about my home and my people, which I'd tried to brush away politely so I could focus on flying. Once I'd gotten that part down, however, it had been hard to ignore her requests. I'd started off just answering what I could think of, as neutrally as I could; however, it had quickly spiraled into her obviously peeking at my memories whenever I tried to think back on something, and drawing conclusions from partial information. She'd quickly become... upset with several parts of human civilization; most of all, probably, with the way we linked as much we could of our scientific progress into the industry of war.

So instead, I'd begun quizzing her on the first things I could think of, in order to divert her attention – it goes without saying that the last thing I needed during my first day of flight was the equivalent an angry wasp buzzing around in my head. Quite soon I had gone from diverting her attention to diverting my own; I should've expected it, obviously, but meeting and learning the ways of an entirely alien civilization was rather fascinating.

So I'd first learned – confirmed, really, because I had been suspecting it for a while – that Elytra was apparently quite a scholar. Magister in the Field was her official title, which sounded fairly fancy to me despite her embarrassed assertion that it was most certainly nothing impressive at all. Changeling society functioned as some sort of modular caste-based society, from what I could tell – despite her horror at me using that word to describe it, she eventually had to accept the term was reasonably fitting. Every hiveling was born with certain potential and characteristics inherited from her ancestors, while maintaining the ability to adapt herself to whatever application she wished to fulfill.

Elytra herself was from a long bloodline of scholars, but she was adamant in pointing out that “anyone could become anything they wished”. A more fitting statement than usual, perhaps, what with their transforming abilities and whatnot; still, it felt a bit idealistic to my ears, and at first glance seemed more like an excuse to keep the castes in line with, than an actual truth.

Changeling civilization was made up of various Hives; city-like conglomerations of hivelings, bound under a single Hivelord elected from the populace, by the populace. The Hivelord and all his hivelings are in turn bound to the monarch; again, elected from the populace, by the populace. Direct democracy – even on a national level – is quite effective when the mayor of every city has a mind link to his citizens, it would seem.

The subject of the mind-link itself wasn't one Elytra wanted to broaden my horizons on, however, and when I started asking about her bloodlines and ancestral memories and whatnot she became even more evasive than before. Thus it started; first a half-hour long tirade of magical and scientific facts I couldn't understand the first thing of – I swear she made them up on the spot just to lose me – and then when I finally ran out of patience she opened up a scene of her own memory to me just to get me off her back.

Which was when I really started having trouble focusing on flying, because I became entirely absorbed by the thing. It wasn't any fast-forward overloaded feed of information, either – that might be how she did things, but I'm pretty sure I would've crashed my brain trying or something – this was like watching a movie.

A rather strange movie, of course, what with the ponies and all. Colorful things to be sure; rather like the changelings in many ways, except the part about lacking wings, a unified color scheme, common purpose, quicksilver skin, cheeselegs and a generally insectoid feel. Princess Mercury had definitely lived up to her name, however, which was rather amusing; her long, shimmering silver mane had almost seemed to live a life on its own before the eyes of the old stallion we'd looked out of, and while the pristine white of her coat was a stark contrast to the changelings' black, the familiar emerald sheen of her eyes and lit horn made the connection seem rather obvious.

Obvious in presence, at least, but the *how* of it was entirely lost on me due to the fact that I lacked a single clue on how to go from a pearl white unicorn filly to the vastly more alien appearance and characteristics of the changelings in any reasonable timeframe. No clue, because I had next to no experience with magic or however the hell that would work – even if that

was obviously the big kicker in it all – and Elytra was in no mood to let me find out.

So now I finally turned my attention back to our surroundings, trying to take stock of the land around us. The compass dangled around my neck on its bright red cord as I threw my eyes at every last corner of the massive landscape, trying to place the mountains around me. After a few seconds of that futile exercise – it was like counting stars, really – I reached inward for a bit, tapping into Elytra's senses to get a better picture of the swarm. One of the scouts were sure to have some sort of idea of the area we were in.

Discerning different types of changelings from one another was difficult, to say the least. For one thing, the fact that I was just borrowing Elytra's senses had its impact. It was like the difference between speaking face-to-face with someone and talking with them on the phone. Muddled, fuzzy and distant, in a way. Heck, my mom can't even tell if she's talking to me or my brother unless we tell her which one it is – his wife is probably the only one I know of who regularly can tell which one of us she's talking to, and it's not like we're twins or anything.

Of course I wasn't looking for voices, *per se*. Every changeling – every creature in the world, from Elytra's explanation – has their own magical, astral, whatever signature, that's unique to them. Changelings use this as a sort of ID tag, instinctively translating the signature to patterns in the way quicksilver is distributed throughout their bodies. Handy, one would suppose, in a society where everyone looks pretty much the same.

Looking with this second set of eyes, I could make out bright marks, like tattoos, across the flanks of the hivelings around me. Weakly pulsating lines ran across the rest of their bodies, near-invisible and spindly things, but the mercury marks were clear as day. Their designs were complex things that gave me the impression of hieroglyphs; images and shapes that came together in a strangely perfect symmetry, conveying a thousand words of every single individual.

Racking my head trying to figure out what the signs meant, I stared intently at the images one after another, until I noticed one that felt extremely

familiar. Oddly enough, I couldn't see it – I felt all the signs and shapes, but it was like I was feeling something *behind* me.

It took me a few seconds until I realized that I was in fact sensing Elytra's own mark, now an invisible brand on the back of my neck. Immediately after realizing this, I felt the semblance of *knowledge* in part of the mark. Without my eyes deceiving me, I could much easier understand the message it was trying to convey. This was a scholar's mark.

Like the inevitable force of the rising tide, understanding fell into place from nowhere into my head. She was female. She was nineteen years of age. She was of the scholar caste. She had two parents – the number seemed significant somehow – both of whom were of the scholar caste, and of the same bloodline. She was a Magister in the Field, promoted four months back from the ranks of scribes in the Basileo. She had broken no Oaths. She had never procreated. She had –

STOP!

Elytra's scream rung in my head, accompanied by a spike of pain. Instantly the silvery lines across my vision evaporated, as she drew her self as far away from mine as she could. I could still feel the enormous, looming fire of her emotions burning in the distance, but our minds were as far from each other as they could get. Hers was an eruption of embarrassment; mine was a stirring pot of wild and confused thoughts.

“Why?” were the first words I could manage to form. “Why!?” Eventually, I was able to evolve this simple interjection to a more sensible query. “Gudars skymning! Do you wear your entire lives like clothing? Hells, *procreation!* Is there anything at all that's private to your kind!?”

And then, finally, did the dots connect. The one secret she had, and she'd shared it with me.

Her name.

“I'm sorry,” I managed after a decidedly pregnant silence. “I'm sorry,” I repeated, “Elytra.”

Several minutes passed before my companion had calmed her spirit enough to let me use her eyes again. Tense silence hung between us as I looked around me; not too hard, not too much. Privacy was a strange notion to changelings, and difficult for me to apply when a simple glance could be as invasive as rummaging through someone's room, diary and mail all together.

After a few moments of piecing together caste signs across various hivelings, I swept my wings and fell down a bit to catch a word with one of the swarm's scouts.

The muscular female gave me a considering look as I fell in beside her, but resumed her vigilant watch of the land flying by beneath us once she'd adapted her position to my massive wingspan. "Careful with those, Hunter," she admonished me in a deep, crackling alto. The wind was reasonably mild now, so shouting was no longer a necessity to make yourself heard. "What brings you?"

I managed to crack a grin at her. "Why does anyone seek a scout? I need a report on our surroundings. Also, the swarm is tiring. Are there any suitable landing spots nearby?"

The scout shot me a suspicious glance – fair enough, before returning her eyes to the front. "Let her Majesty worry about the swarm, Hunter. There's a water-filled valley another few beats to the southwest. We should be able to get there before nightfall."

I raised an eyebrow at this. "So we're out of the Arctic, then? Are you sure?"

She shrugged dismissively at me, and I realized I wasn't really reading her body language as much as I was feeling her project emotions at me. There was no way she could've conveyed any sort of message I could understand otherwise. "I don't know anything about this 'arctic' of yours, but on our current latitude the sun will pass the horizon in approximately two hours."

I gave her a nod in thanks, and beat my wings to gain height. It would be nice to see the night sky again.

The vale was enormous, carving a path tens of kilometers across between two mountain ranges like a scar in the earth itself. Half of it was underwater, while the other half was now speckled with spots of black here and there. The sun was going down – it'd been almost a week since I saw that last time – and the hivelings had broken up into little congregations of their own, settling down in the valley. In a cove not far from the water's edge, I was sequestered with Chrysalis and her personal guard – the very lot that had stood their ground against me during our first encounter – and of course, Elytra.

I must say I had mixed emotions about being down on the ground again. Now that I'd learned how to handle myself in the low-gravity environment her magic provided me, I felt a bit clumsy walking around with so much weight on me. Of course, my mass was still the exact same, but knowing the physics of it didn't help one bit in relieving myself of the feeling of being a fat, lumbering drunkard I got as I walked around our little camp, trying to get my feet used to being back on the ground.

All in all, however, it was a fairly uneventful evening. I drew quite a few wondering gazes as I yet again unpacked my trangia – I hadn't used the stove on our lunch break, so none of the other hivelings had seen it before – and stirred up my dinner. All while this was happening, the changelings were having their own dinner, so to speak. I'd gotten quite a bit better at handling my emotions; another skill that I'd been able to train up with Elytra's help during the flight. Channeling my emotions was still a fairly weird experience, but the senses Elytra shared with me gave a whole new perspective on the thing – and more importantly made it a whole lot easier. I could actually feel it, now. The power rushing through our collective veins as she absorbed my feelings of love, alongside the asphyxiation, the strange sense of loss and numbness that came with Chrysalis taking her share.

And power breeds more power, as the saying goes.

Sitting there eating and riding the high like an electrical surge through my body, I felt pretty content with things. Not that there was any change in my objectives – I still had to get home, no matter what – but at least, it seemed as if this little detour wouldn't be as unpleasant as I had thought. The

opposite, even. Pleasant indeed, if today's experiences were any guide. Flying! Gods, who would've thought.

And now this. This unmistakable feeling of force, power like nothing I'd ever felt before. Surging through me like a storm, screaming in my neurons like a thousand eagles, rebounding, rebounding, rebounding—

“KUH!”

I drew a long, deep breath, filling my almost empty lungs and alleviating the ever-growing pain in my chest. Slowly but surely, the black-green specks of emptiness fled my vision as oxygen rushed back into my body. The sensation of *power* was still burning inside my head, pulsating like a strobe, but I had managed to break out of the loop. My head felt like someone was striking it with a hammer; worse, I could feel the exact same mirroring across from Elytra, as well, her pains beating in rhythm with mine.

But through all of that, there was still the power. Elytra was in complete ecstasy, filled to the point of breaking and entirely incoherent. Glowing cords of light were half-visible in the air between me and Chrysalis, fading slowly as I broke out of my reverie.

Chrysalis, whose face was one of panic.

The queen dashed up to me and slugged me in the shoulder with a hoof. “You *idiot!* You mindless, shell-brained *child!* You could have burned yourself out like a snuffed candle! You could have killed yourself! You—UGH!” With a roar, she started pummeling me for all she was worth in a flurry of holey hooves and smattering wings.

Which, honestly, wasn't too much.

“Relax, Chrysalis,” I said as soothingly as I manage – despite the twin headaches boring through my skull – fending the rampant queen off as best I was able. “Bloody hell, woman, calm down! You're letting my emotions get to your head.”

A shocked silence permeated the camp, and Chrysalis froze in my arms. The next moment, I heard a stifled laughter from behind me, and it was quickly joined by several chuckles throughout the guards' ranks.

A sullen Chrysalis let her eyes bore through my skull as I let her go, planting her hooves back on the ground. "That wasn't funny," she grumbled. More likely, though, she was just bitter that I'd stolen her joke before she could think of it. The next second, my other half voiced my thoughts, and I felt an immense relief surge through me. I hadn't turned Elytra into a vegetable trapped inside my head. That, at least, was only good.

A few minutes later, the camp was mostly back to normal again. Chrysalis and Elytra both had lectured me on the need of learning to control my emotions when channeling, and avoiding loops like that at all costs; I had joined Chrysalis in her renewed criticism of melding as a whole, with the dangers of it now a bit more obvious; and completing the fancy little triangle, Elytra had agreed with every word I said about Chrysalis' hotheadedness. Letting emotions get to her head, indeed – with changelings, that was almost literal. Quite apparently, they were affected by the energy they absorbed, and the Queen more so than any others, since she could draw upon it faster.

It was a nice little mess I left behind me as I took my stove and cup, and started walking down towards the lake. The guards were settling in for the night, and Chrysalis had already fallen asleep by the time their little green watchfires sprung up around the camp. At last darkness had claimed the land again, and I felt very relaxed walking through the sparse forest on the way to the beach. I've always been more of a winter person, really, and going without proper night for too long tends to make me antsy. The sky was still faintly blue, but I could make out a few of the brighter stars; in an hour or two, we'd have as much of a night as you can get this time of year.

She won't need to feed anyone for days, now. Elytra's voice chimed across my thoughts like a chorus of bells. That single outburst gave her almost as much as she had in Canterlot, and the rest of the swarm should be filled to the brim. That sort of beacon could've been felt flights away, Martin. She held a cautious tone, but I could feel her wonder sifting through; she was still riding the high. Not too strange, seeing as she'd taken it all point blank,

filled herself to breaking and when she couldn't take any more, funneled the rest over to me. If I'd been a walking battery for the changelings before, I must've been a damn fusion reactor for a minute there. *Burning like the sun itself*, Elytra whispered.

Eventually, we reached the shoreline. The moon hung full in the air like a silvery pearl, and the still waters of the great lake reflected it like a mirror. More stars were out now, with the night sky ever darker, but they only served to make the land brighter in return.

I ran my eyes across the vale as I worked the dishes with my hands, rinsing the remains of mashed potatoes and peanuts from their metal surfaces. Aside from the tiny ripples I made with my hands, the water was entirely undisturbed. All the light reflecting off it made it almost shine, and I could almost make out little glints in the corner of my eyes. Glints, shining little sparkles of scintillating light—

I jutted my head to the left, as I finally caught the strangely familiar sight with my eyes. Like tiny versions of the giant beam I'd seen yesterday – though it felt much longer since – they permeated the air around the beach, swirling around each other like a swarm of fireflies. Seconds later they started gathering, and I had to shield my eyes from their brightness. A single clear tone, crystalline and pure, rung through the night, and I cautiously moved my hand aside to take a look.

On the sandy beach stood, balanced on its tip, a bright blue heart-shaped crystal. It shone with a mellow yellow glint, but I could almost feel its presence in the air. Hairs rose on my neck as Elytra gave a loud moan, and this time there was nothing I could do to stem the tide of undiluted love that washed through the air.

Only moments passed, though, before the flow turned to ebb. A murky shadow manifested atop the crystal heart, radiating an aura of menace that I could feel even without Elytra's senses, and soon it took on a more defined shape. Equine, more clearly so than the changelings were – very much like the unicorns I'd seen in Elytra's memory, in fact – yet it was clear that it remained a formless cloud of shadow, from the way its wispy limbs stirred in the slight wind.

“Why are you standing there?”

The words rung through the night, spoken from no mouth, and my eyes widened – as did the eyes of the mysterious dark unicorn in front of me.

“Wise one... I am waiting. It is the way, the order of all. The Crystal Heart – the Venus star – comes, and I follow. It draws the others, as it draws me.”

The shadowy creature's voice was like a wind, but its menacing tone had me frozen on the spot, hoping dearly that it wouldn't turn around.

“What of the others? Do you have all the stars?”

I thought I could make out the image of a giant eye hanging in the air behind the unicorn, staring at the dark creature; still, the disembodied voice held only an immense weight. There was no intent in it, none of the pure hatred that radiated from the shadowy form's words like heat from a bonfire.

“The latter stars remain lost, wise one. Opposing elements repel each other. Even if they follow one another like Mercury follows Venus, I can only track one group at a time. I would not lose the stars I have for a meager chance at finding the ones I do not.”

The eye let its gaze linger on the dark unicorn; for a moment, though, I felt as if it was looking through him, right at me. My bones felt laden with ice as it once more spoke up.

“I can feel it, Sombra. It will return soon. You must not let them light the beacon. They will try, but they must be stopped.”

The eye faded – if it had ever been there and not just a vision inside my mind, it was surely gone now – and as if on cue, the crystal heart dissolved into a myriad of tiny sparkles once more.

“Unity's embrace...”

The shadow – Sombra – remained only a second before he, too, dispersed into a thin mist of nothingness. His last words hung in the air like a silent

gunshot, however, and it took me almost a minute before I could move again.

Dishes were the absolute last thing on my mind now – I left my things lying in the water and ran up to the spot where the phantasms had appeared. There, in the sand, was a tiny conical hole, the only sign that remained of where the crystal heart had stood only moments ago, as steadily entrenched in the earth as if it'd rested on a pedestal made for it.

“It was there...”

I could feel Elytra starting to gather her thoughts for a reply, but before anything could come of that I once again heard the clear, crystalline tone from before permeate the air. It was not the same – nine years of music education and more had taught me more than well enough to differentiate an F# from an E – but it was the same sound, as if it had come from the same, perfectly tuned instrument, or been sung by the same voice.

The next moment, I heard a loud *plop* behind me. I spun around, half expecting to see the dark unicorn again; all I could make out, however, was my dishes, showered in a bright, blue light coming from the water. Or rather, the *something* in the water that I'd just heard go *plop*.

Much to my surprise dishes were now the absolute first thing on my mind, as I scrambled back across the beach to see what the hell had just happened.

Entry #9 - A Forgotten Star

A Forgotten Star

Entry #9

1st of July, 22:37

Beach on the eastern shoreline of Lake Vale

912m ASL

Temperature 12° C, Wind Speed 1 m/s NE

There was a sphere of calm blue light glowing in the water.

I stared dumbfounded at it for a moment, unsure what to think or do. I could feel *something* from Elytra – as if she was quivering, barely holding herself in from doing...

What?

I shook my head and hunched down to get a closer look. By some odd luck, it had landed right on top of my dishes; thus, I didn't need to risk touching it to bring it out of the water, instead simply lifting it up along with one of the stove pots.

As soon as I gripped it, I could feel something was off. It was light, much too light – as if there wasn't anything inside it at all – and yet, I could clearly see the water splashing around before my eyes, totally oblivious of its apparent weightlessness.

I turned my eyes inward for a moment. Elytra was *vibrating*, and I could feel the little patch of black on my neck whirling like a tornado. Trying not to think of an angry mutated tumor too much, I reached out to her. "Elytra." As my presence drew closer to hers, the quivering died down, and I felt a

massive surge of relief – and fear – from her. “Do you have any idea what this is?”

In a moment she was at my side, her genie-like body hanging in the air, emerald eyes wide and staring into the light. “I don’t have the faintest idea,” she breathed, moaning slightly as she inched her nose closer and closer to the sphere. “I don’t know anything about it, but...”

I shifted my eyes to look at my companion for a moment. She was losing control completely – that I could easily sense from the state of her mind – and I had no idea what to do about it, or why. Except for the obvious fact that this blue shining orb-thingy had something to do with it.

“It calls to me...”

For a moment, her voice became split in twain just like Chrysalis', and out of sheer panic I reached out with my arm to push her away from the orb. Her eyes were almost down in the shallow waters of the pot it lay in, however, and I couldn’t avoid getting my hand wet in the process. Wet, and...

I briefly felt my finger touch something solid, and the entire world went white.

No, not white. Bright, shining silvery gray, fading, darkening, moving in ripples like—

MARTIN!

For the second time that day I drew myself out of a reverie with a deep, hulking breath; though nowhere as frantic as it had been last time. My face was dripping – I’d been down in the water! – stripes of my long hair had come loose from my normally well-kept ponytail, and hung like wet snakes across my cheeks. However, despite the sad state of my eyesight at the moment I could easily tell that there was an obvious absence of blue light shining in my face. What had happened to the orb?

Martin! Can you hear me?

I drew another breath, which immediately had me stuck in a fit of coughing to get the water out of my throat. My hands were unsteady, but I managed to wipe my eyes clear fairly well. I blinked a few times, and finally managed to stop coughing, drawing another deep breath as I tried to settle down a bit.

“Blod och jävla skalperad åsneröv...”

I opened my eyes again, and once again found myself completely stumped.

There was no water in the pot. All that remained inside the aluminum pot was the object that had been the source of all this grief to begin with: a clear blue orb, a tiny speck of light shining at its heart like a distant star. Shimmering spots of bright and dark played across the sphere's insides, like the sun shining through leaves in the wind.

At least it seemed to have lost its weightlessness, since I could clearly feel it rolling gently as I moved the pot around. “Huh,” was all I managed to get out of my mouth. I felt something wet against my legs, and looked down; only now did I realize that my entire right arm was dripping with water, the bamboo cloth and layers of polyester soaked all the way through to the skin.

It pulled you in, Martin.

I froze, my eyes stuck staring at the idle droplets running down my arm one by one.

When you touched it, it pulled you in, and lit up even brighter. It must have stopped shining when you came back up – I had to go inside for you to hear me.

It took me several seconds to make myself move, break free of the sudden fear that had gripped my stomach like a vise. Slowly, I crouched down again and placed the pot in the sand, my eyes fixed on the still-glowing orb.

What in hell's name could this thing be?

-/-/-

It was roughly half an hour later that I shook Chrysalis out of her sleep to ask her the same question. The changeling queen was barely conscious – a heavy sleeper if I ever saw one – but when the object in question was brought before her, she jolted back to full awareness in the blink of an eye. “Where did you get this,” she whispered softly. Her emerald eyes were completely glued to the orb, and her ears were pointing skyward. She hadn’t seen any of what we had – since she’d been asleep she obviously hadn’t had the chance to use her mind-link to Elytra, and I wasn’t even sure how that worked through the melding and all – she hadn’t seen anything, and yet it seemed she was...

Afraid.

It couldn’t be clearer that she knew something we didn’t, so I tried to pry what I could out of her before spilling my own beans. “Do you know anything about this? I can’t make heads or tails of it, and neither can Elytra.” I put my hand on her shoulder, to try and grab her attention away from the sphere for a bit. “Chrysalis, what is this thing?”

For a short, short moment she flicked her gaze to looked at me, and I saw her fear clear as day. I didn’t even need to send any feelers into Elytra’s senses to recognize the signs on her face, that look in her eyes. Queen Chrysalis was very, very afraid – and she didn’t know how to handle that emotion at all.

So with my best interests at heart – and hers, at the end of it – I decided to grab the tiller and try to steer her mind into somewhat more familiar waters. Or, failing that, at least get what I could out of her.

I grabbed her at the shoulders with both hands – a bit more forcefully this time – and thrust my head at her, trying to break her off from just staring mindlessly at the orb. “Chrysalis,” I said once more, my voice as calm and methodical as I could make in spite of my impatience. “Focus. What is this thing? What do you know about it?”

As I zoned her gaze away from the orb, she turned her head to the side, shame clear on her face. “I...” She sighed, and took a few quick steps away from me and the orb, shaking her head. “Not much, really. It’s a very old

memory, and things that are passed through so many individual lines..." She gave me a hard, measuring look. "There's a reason why the Mercurial Archives are so precious, after all. Everything else aside, they are by far the oldest clear memories we have – the rest are either just bits and pieces, or jumbled by death and chaos to the point where nothing in them make much sense at all."

By now, she had me listening attentively. Elytra had mentioned that the memory she'd shown me before was part of something called the Mercurial Archives, but she'd never really explained the term. If there was more of that lying around...

Chrysalis didn't let my thoughts stray for long, however. "Since the beginning of time, ponies have struggled to define the nature of magic. Its many, ever-changing natures, rather – that is why, I suppose, we've always had so much trouble succeeding. However, in the ancient times before the founding of Equestria, and for several centuries of its early existence, the mages would define its constituents as four separate elements: The Elements of Magic."

I broke in – with many years of dealing in literature and other media of the more fantastically kind, I was pretty sure I had this one down pat. "Let me guess. Water, Earth, Wind and Fire?"

My confident smile dissolved, however, when Chrysalis shook her head. "Not quite, Hunter. Those natural elements have always been secondary to the practitioners of magic. No, the four elements of magic are Change, Love, Pride and Wrath. These four great pillars of the mind were what mages of all races sought to achieve. Most could only master one of them, but a very select few were able to delve deeper into their abilities and call upon several at a time."

"These few grand masters of magic were known as Alchemists, and when they worked together to bring all the four elements of magic together, they worked objects of great wonder into the world."

I raised a hand to interrupt. "Hold on. Alchemists? I thought they were the kind of guys who made potions and shit, trying to make gold from lead, or

an elixir of life from..." I never managed to finish that line, though. The puzzle was still all too much in pieces, yet I had managed to spot its presence. Something was very wrong here, and it wasn't just the weird links between my mythology and this place's ancient history.

Chrysalis sighed and shook her head, apparently letting my slip slide. She probably had enough on her mind as it was. "Ironically that is all that remains of alchemy today, and the only bit of its knowledge that has survived. We do not practice it – the effects one can produce with the primitive level of mastery possible there are nothing we have any use of – but we know that some of the other races do still. They are persecuted for this, because it does not fit in. Not anymore."

She turned her back to me, gazing into the distance as she went on. "I have no memories of any details, but in ancient times there was a...conflict, with the ponies facing a creature, or a force, named Discord. There were two great Alchemists among the ponies at that time, the princesses Luna and Celestia – this is all hindsight, of course, but we're fairly certain they were instrumental in that struggle – who lead the ponies against Discord and claimed victory. Yet when the field of battle cleared..."

She shook her head again, and turned to face me. "This is mostly speculation, of course, but for it all to have been coincidence seems a rather far-fetched notion. We know virtually nothing first-hand from the ponies' war on Discord, and what we know of the conflict itself is bungled and mashed into so many legends and old pony tales that half of them seem to contradict each other on every point, and the other half tell us almost nothing at all. What we know for fact, is that before the emergence of Discord, at least, alchemy was widely practiced by all mages in the known world. After, however..."

Her horn lit up, and its fire drew four familiar shapes in the air. I could recognize the marks normally used to denote *male* and *female* in there, and then there was one more like the *female* one except it had a little half-circle on top of it; lastly there was some sort of twisted shape vaguely resembling the number 4, though I couldn't make heads or tails out of that one.

Before I could draw any further conclusions there, however, two more shapes appeared: a large shining orb, and a crescent moon, which probably meant that the first one was supposed to be the sun. It was a bit hard to tell when everything was the same green as Chrysalis' eyes, but the symbolism was clear enough.

The four symbols – I guessed they were supposed to represent the elements – began swirling around the sun and moon, soon whirling too fast for me to see other than as a circle of green fire. When the bright band of flames finally slowed down enough for me to recognize any shapes in it, they had changed. Changed, and multiplied. Six distinct shapes, none familiar, now rotated around the two celestial bodies, and the old elements were nowhere to be seen. The sun and moon shone ever brighter than before, and seemed connected to the new symbols somehow.

Naturally, none of this meant to me by itself, so I shifted my stare onto Chrysalis, demanding an explanation.

“After that conflict, magic was different. Nothing seemed to work the same way it did before, and many spells failed without anypony knowing why. The Elements of Magic were gone and forgotten, buried in the chaos of the long war; in their place were the six Elements of Harmony, and their two eternal protectors. Records mention little of Luna and Celestia's heritage, or their status before the war, but given their proficiency in alchemy it seems unlikely they were candidates for the crown. After, however, the throne of Equestria was theirs and theirs alone, and with their newfound immortality they weren't likely to be ousted from it any time soon.”

Immortality. That word rung in my ears with a strange, compelling sound, and suddenly dreams of old and wild theories were beginning to live their own lives in my head. I could sense Elytra's confusion at my reaction, but I massaged my temples, a disbelieving grimace on my face, before asking Chrysalis to continue.

“The Elements of Harmony – Loyalty, Honesty, Kindness, Generosity, Laughter and Leadership. Over centuries to come, Celestia and Luna ingrained these into the civilization of ponykind, replacing all notion of the old magic with the new. I'm skipping a great number of things, but this isn't

a history lesson – suffice it to say that to this day, Luna and Celestia still reign in Canterlot.” For a brief moment, fury burned in the queen’s eyes as she drew upon her memories. “I was able to defeat them both, them and their Elements of Harmony, but when I thought I finally had everything in my grasp...”

She shifted her eyes back to the orb, still lying in the pot it had landed in. “I had my suspicions, I must say, but I never expected this. That Alchemy itself, in however limited form, survived, should have been an obvious sign that the old Elements weren’t dead or gone. What Princess Cadence did yesterday – harnessing the power of Love itself to repel every last changeling from Canterlot – should really have got me thinking more, but...”

I saw her frown, and I felt obliged to reply. “Don’t sweat it. Hell knows you’ve had enough things to think about. Me, for one.”

She gave me a thankful smile, and shook her head. “That I have. Still, it is no excuse. I should have been more prepared. Now, I am the only one who remembers – and I cannot for all the love in the world figure out what is going on here.”

She cleared her throat, before walking up to me and settling a hoof just above the orb. “This object is a product of alchemy, without doubt. A product, as well as a source of magic. It is immensely powerful, and overly complex yet entirely simple at the same time. That is about as much as I can sense from it...”

Her eyebrows curved down and she gave me a decidedly angry stare. The game was up. “And that is everything we will know until you tell me *everything* about how you came by this object. Everything, Martin. Every single detail, *every, last, word.*”

It was late into the small hours of the night before I managed to get away from her interrogation; heavens know, she was thorough. I had to rack my brain both once and twice to remember in detail the strange conversation between the shadowy stallion and the disembodied voice, and Elytra refused to help me; she’d gone silent not far into the whole ordeal, and if my

guess wasn't entirely off she had likely fallen asleep somehow, sequestered in her own little corner of our shared mind.

I gave every detail and every word I could remember, and when Chrysalis thought I was holding something back she stared at me again with those flaring eyes and had me go through it all again. She took everything she wanted, and gave nothing back; when I asked her what she thought, all she ever said was, "We will speak again come morning, Hunter," and nothing more. The times she didn't just ignore my protests completely and barrel away with another set of questions, that was.

I left the mysterious orb lying there in its pot, and didn't even bother gathering up the rest of the stove at all – they were all lying in a wet heap at the foot of my little corner of the camp – before rumbling my way over to my things to tuck myself in for the night. It was fairly dark, but there was a hint of sunlight showing in the far northeast. Still, it was far better than I'd had so far, and I briefly considered sleeping without the blindfold on before deciding against it.

As I wriggled myself down into my sleeping bag and started shedding some of my extra layers, I heard Elytra's voice mumbling something inaudible inside my head. I could only stare in disbelief for a few seconds, before I cursed loudly and tied my blindfold in anger. I had always had trouble sleeping – lack of melatonin in my body, most likely – but having to endure a sleeptalking changeling inside my head was, I suspected, going to take my insomnia to a whole new level of misery.

As per usual, however, thinking about it would only incite mister Murphy to enforce his law even stricter on my already sorry ass. With a sour grimace on my face, I bunched down and buried myself in the polyester sheets, trying my best to ignore Elytra's sporadic mumbling as I sought to drift off into sleep.

But if Murphy himself usually only bothers you if you're thinking about him, his loyal underlings at the meteorology department has never had any such qualms. More importantly, they very much enjoy tormenting the poor souls who are completely unprepared for whatever shit they can toss at them any given day.

And naturally, all of this chaos had made me completely forget any sane hiker's first tenet.

Never, ever, *ever* trust the fucking weather.

Entry #10 - Of the Elements

Of the Elements

Entry #10

2nd of July, 08:31

Queen Chrysalis' camp, Lake Vale

941m ASL, Precipitation 6,1mm/h (sleet)

Temperature 2° C, Wind Speed 16 m/s S

What woke me up that morning was, most likely, any hiker's worst nightmare.

A biting cold wind found its way down my sleeping bag, and brought with it moist air that made my bones rattle. My first thought was that I'd probably taken off a few layers too many going to sleep; the second, however, hit me a moment later when a heavy, fat drop of sloshing half-liquid water impacted onto my improvised blindfold, and seeped through like a mass of crawling bugs.

It was raining.

I opened my eyes wide, immediately rushing awake for the second morning in a row. While that didn't give me much sight to speak of as I still had a t-shirt wrapped around my head, the awareness that waking came with deepened my insight and put it into a frighteningly detailed context.

It was raining – raining hard – the wind was hard and the air was almost freezing cold; I had no shelter, my rain gear was meager at best, and I had absolutely no idea where I was.

I tore the shirt off my head with a blubbing gasp as I struggled against the fabric for a moment, and eyed my surroundings with a frantic stare. The sparse vegetation of the clearing we'd set up camp in was whipped to the ground by wind and water, and the sleeping changelings looked almost like enormous moss-painted slabs of volcanic rock, undisturbed in their rest despite being completely soaked.

I dismissed the idea of waking them up after remembering Elytra's little speech about their temperature-resistant shells, and instead shifted my focus to my equipment. Luckily I'd kept the rain covering on my backpack up while flying, and never bothered to take it down with all the things that had happened yesterday; that little stroke of luck, at least, meant that there was at least some chance of my things being not entirely drenched. I had some electronics in there, too – I'd hate to see them broken, especially in a place like this where I sure as hell couldn't just go to the store and buy new ones.

With everything else accounted for, I pondered my course of action for a moment. Essentially, I had two choices. Curl up, get back to sleep and hope the best I could that the weather would relent before I froze to death, was one. All in all, it didn't seem like a very clever course of action, so I quickly settled for option number two.

Getting out of my sleeping bag would be a wet, messy business, and seeing as I'd slept on my rain jacket, I didn't have anything decently dry that could protect me from the weather's onslaught in the first place. In all essence, I was doomed to endure this blasted rain unless I found shelter – yeah, that was likely – or some other way of getting away from the weather. Looking upward for a moment crushed any hopes I had of it being just a small, local storm, however, and my spirits sunk down as if tied to a rock thrown off a mountain.

Something about that stray thought remained for a second round, though, and got me thinking. "Mountain. Mountain... a mountain!" I burst out. With those words out of my mouth, I realized exactly what had to be done – I just had to get *above* the storm. Thankfully, those words coming back into my ears startled Elytra enough to rouse her from her own sleep, so I didn't have to spend time figuring out how to accomplish that part of the plan.

The feeling of *waking up* while you were already awake was, I admit, nothing like I'd expected. At first it was almost the same feeling as the one I'd had when we melded – like cold water flowing into my veins, spreading from that spot on my neck where Elytra somehow stored her body. Then it became a vague snowdrift of emotions, disorientation mixed with sleepiness, annoyance and thirteen other various trace elements of whatever dream she'd had before waking up. If changelings had dreams, that was, but that was a question for a later day. Right now, I had a storm to evade.

“Elytra, wake up,” I said with a sense of urgency; conveying subtleties was, thankfully, blessedly simple when speaking to someone inside your own head.

She gave me a rather girlish yawn in response – she seemed to have lost most of the rasp in her voice ever since we melded, and if I didn't know better I'd have sworn her behavior was becoming more and more...*human*. That wasn't possible, though – you didn't just up and become a different species entirely just from sitting in someone's head for a while. Surely, one did not.

Murphy's law being what it is, of course, I had to eat those words the very next moment.

The girlish yawn was quickly followed by the spot on my neck stirring like a boiling pot, before giving off a distinct *pop* and, to my immense surprise, disappearing. I felt it go, like a chunk of my own flesh just jaunting out of existence. In its place, a small, black cocoon manifested right before my eyes, and despite it being disconnected from my body I could feel it like it was part of it. The cocoon briefly burned with the green fire of changeling magic before opening.

I was expecting some form like what I'd seen from Elytra the previous day, shapes derived off her own hiveling body, to come out of it – all things counted, that's what the signs pointed to. Imagine my surprise when it instead revealed a fairy-like creature two hands tall; obviously human and female in shape, though reasonably changeling-colored with coal-black skin, two pairs of translucent wings and a mane of vivid green hair that stealthily draped itself around the curves and joints of her body.

“Mmgoodmorning, Martin,” Elytra’s new form said drowsily – without a single trace of rasp in her voice, or for that part echoing any of the words inside my head.

It was a pretty impressive development, and something I definitely had to speak to her about later – undoubtedly she’d been rummaging through my head quite a bit for reference, that much was clear enough – but even with how uncomfortable that made me feel, there were more pressing things to be dealt with than that.

“No, Elytra, it’s not a good morning. It’s the worst morning we could possibly have, in fact – well, I guess an outright thunderstorm would be a bit worse still, but anyway – we need to get out of this weather. Right now. Otherwise we have something like an hour or two before I freeze to death.”

That was a rather massive exaggeration, and she probably realized it as well – it was rather hard being dishonest to someone you literally shared your thoughts with. That same mechanic gave her the hard, true facts as well, however, and she was surely still able to feel what I felt in my own body still. The water had begun seeping in by now, and with it came the biting cold; and the moment I exposed my wet body to the winds, it would be a hundred times worse. The clock was ticking, without a doubt, and Elytra didn’t have to spend much time to realize it.

“How?” was all she managed before another yawn cracked her tiny jaws, her wings fluttering erratically as she struggled to shake herself awake. She must’ve been working on her new form instead of sleeping, if she was this tired – that might’ve been what she was doing while I was being interrogated by Chrysalis, for one.

Thankfully, the solution I had in mind for my meteorological dilemma wasn’t very hard to explain. “Fly above it. If we power your spell up a bit, we can easily gain altitude enough to breach these clouds, and fast.”

Elytra’s eyes widened a bit at my proposition, but her acceptance of my plan was all but clear from what I felt from her. “I thought you said we weren’t going to do that again?” She gave me a stern look – or at least tried to, but she wasn’t quite up to par with Chrysalis in that department – and shook her

head. "Never mind. Get dressed and gear up – I will inform her majesty." And to my great surprise, she took off into the rain, leaving me wrapped up in my own cocoon while she went to wake the queen.

I was about to get a bit angry at her for running off like that – it was another delay to be had, and I didn't want to stay in this damn weather for a single moment longer than I had to – but the second I unzipped my sleeping bag and pulled it down to my waist, my wings sprouted like a jack-in-the-box, right where I sat. Immediately I wrapped them around me to stay warm – they were extremely effective windstoppers, even if they didn't do much against the rain – and noticed that she'd put a lot more work in them this time around. While the colors were the same, the feathers weren't long and spindly like a bunch of mutant peacock tails anymore; instead, they were a tightly woven mesh of fluffy down with clearly slotted primaries, much like an eagle's.

That only kept me distracted for a few seconds, though, as the rain swiftly worked its way through my freshly regrown limbs, resuming its chilling crusade against my body heat with the same ferocity as before. Shaking as much water as I could off my wings, I pulled off the rest of the sleeping bag and started to get dressed.

It wasn't a very comfortable process. My boots were soggy and wet, like everything else except the few things I'd kept in my pillow pack and actually slept on top of. Some of the magical properties of the wings allowed me to actually wear things *through* them – I'd experimented with that yesterday, but it still felt fairly weird to put on a shirt in slow-motion like you were forcing it through a vat of syrup – but they made the process a bit more drawn-out than I'd expected. It didn't take much more than a minute or two before I was all suited up, however, and just as I snapped on the clips of my backpack I spotted Chrysalis looming over towards me, flanked by Elytra's hovering shape.

The changeling queen let out a loud yawn as she walked up to me – she'd stayed up later than me, and I was fairly sure she needed more sleep than I did anyway, so that wasn't much of a surprise – and tried her best to fixate me with her half-lidded, sleepy eyes. "Mmm...Martin. Why are you...up at this hour. Go to sleep." Were it not for the cascading rain keeping her green

mane straight as a taut rope, I swear she'd have had the most epic bedhead ever. Mornings were *really* not Chrysalis' favorite time of day.

I rolled my eyes at her statement, and gave her a sideways look as I started going through the little pre-flight checklist I'd made for myself yesterday. "I'm up at this hour because, in case you haven't noticed, it's *raining like hell*. And unlike some of the species in this bloody world, mine actually runs a danger of freezing to death in conditions like these. So no, I prefer staying awake, thank you very much. I'm going to fly up above this storm until the worst of it blows off, and there will be no further arguing about it." Looking over to the second humanoid in attendance I added, "Elytra, power us up. Also, I'd get in if I were you – I don't know how well that new form of yours can keep up when we start ascending."

My companion gave me a quick nod and – in a rather comical fashion – planted herself on my head, before starting to fire up the levitation magic. That was a process I'd become rather familiar with by now. A series of set emotional states – I was fairly sure that's what they were, at least – rushed through Elytra's mind like a computer program going through lines of code, before finally the sensation of near-weightlessness settled in and her feelings returned to normal. I gave my wings a few testing flaps, before checking the straps on my backpack one last time to make sure everything was fastened properly.

For some reason, Chrysalis hadn't realized she had second thoughts until the very last moment. "Wait! Don't–"

I decided, however, that I'd had just about enough of feeling like a drenched puppy in a fridge for one day. With all the strength my legs and wings could muster, I thrust off the ground. Moments later I tore into the gray mass of clouds like a living bullet, and the world became a blur before my eyes.

Well, most of it, anyway.

Chrysalis had evidently worked out the magic of going really fast as well, because she was following a short distance below me, her wings moving too fast for my eyes to see. "Martin! Listen to me!" I could barely hear her voice, but through Elytra I could sense immense waves of fear and urgency

radiating from the queen, which mirrored itself in my companion's own feelings. I couldn't help but worry, but there wasn't much I could do about the situation at the speed I was going – except try to slow down as safely as I could, which would undoubtedly be a long and tedious process.

I didn't have to decelerate much before Chrysalis caught up to me, however, and I was quite happy to keep up my ascent. We had definitely covered some distance judged by the fact that I was starting to make out the sun above, but we were still surrounded by a thick, wet mass of rainclouds emptying their contents all over us. Stopping wasn't an option quite yet. "Is this really the best time to talk!?" I yelled across the airspace separating us, gesturing as wildly as I could to make sure I got things across. Which probably wasn't necessary due to the whole Changeling Mind Reading or whatever thing they have going, but I didn't care much at that point. There had to be some sort of reason for her following me on this mad dash skyward, and I was going to have it.

Did I mention how easy it is to get across subtleties to changelings?

"You have the Mercury Star in your bag! It's dangerous to expose it to magic! We have no idea what it can do! Get down *immediately!*!"

Naturally, the bloody thing chose to wait until that very moment to do something. Before I even was able to come up with a witty reply I felt a massive surge of energy from behind my head, and the world was enveloped in an intense burst of azure light.

Entry #11 - Sis Mundo Meo

Sis Mundo Meo

Entry #11

2nd of July, 8:59

Airspace, unknown location

4060m ASL, clear skies

Temperature 17° C, Wind Speed 11 m/s N

When I opened my eyes again and realized that the storm had vanished, the first thought I had was that somehow, my luck had been with me for once and I had managed to get my hands on a weather-changing magic orb.

Like all good dreams it shattered the very next second, however, when I looked down. While the clouds were most definitely gone, I had a fairly vivid memory of what the Lake Vale had looked like from above, and I could very easily tell that was not where I was now.

If nothing else, then because even as large as the lake was, it was not an actual ocean.

“Great, just great,” I groaned as I looked around, running my eyes over the distant coastline far below me. I didn’t get very far in that endeavor, though, before I got a hoof jammed into my ribs.

“You *idiot!*”

I could only agree to that sentiment. Chrysalis was wide-eyed and breathing hard, and radiating fear like a herd of zebras cornered by a lion. It seemed a bit excessive to me, but then again I was probably a lot more jaded to random things happening around me than she was, after these last two days.

Elytra was still an ever-present little weight on top of my head, and all things said she was taking this a lot better than the queen was. Her emotions were a healthy mixture of surprise, confusion and fear, but there was considerably less of the third than the two others. “What happened? Where are we?” Her voice was tiny, but managed to get across despite the wind.

I was just about to tell her I had no idea, when Chrysalis jabbed her hoof into my ribs again – and this time, it hurt. “This *idiot* has doomed us all! The swarm is gone! The hives, too! There is nothing! *NOTHING!*” She yelled straight into my ear, and I saw faint traces of violet pooling around her menacing eyes. “Do you know how it feels, Hunter? To have the world destroyed before your eyes, have every single life you know cut off and disappear? *YOU JUST MADE IT HAPPEN, MARTIN WINTER! THEY ARE NO LONGER IN THIS WORLD!*”

Her frantic screams would've echoed like mad if we had been anywhere but suspended in midair, but even then I had to cover my ears to stop them from ringing like a city full of clock towers. I tore my eyes away from her, and ended up looking at something I hadn't expected at all. Something so impossible that the words I were going to say caught in my throat on their way up, and forced me into a violent coughing fit for several seconds.

The sight had not disappeared when it ended, however, and I kept staring at it; eventually, Chrysalis took notice of my undivided attention – and the fact that it was not on her – and demanded an answer. “What are you staring at!? Stop ignoring me!”

I simply raised my finger and pointed down, tracing the familiar silhouette of the island far below us. “You're wrong, Chrysalis.” I looked back at her, and fixed her eyes with a stare. “It's not that they are gone from this world...”

I raised my eyes toward the distant coastline, and sure enough, I found just what I was looking for. “They never were in this world to begin with. I'm back.” I let out a short, barking laugh, and stared at the wide berth of the fjärd with wide open eyes. “This is my world, Chrysalis. And I know exactly where we are.”

-/-/-/

It was a rather different approach than I was used to, all things said. Rather than the ten-kilometer stretch of narrow, meandering road through the forest separating the little coastal village from the highway – a road that I've traveled several times every summer since I was just a year old, and know every turn of – I was coming in hot from above, spearing through the Baltic air from the east. Of course, I wasn't stupid enough to just drop straight down to my target; even if this lazy little community was just starting to come to life at this time of year, it was still summer. The house was empty at the moment – all the families were elsewhere – but that didn't mean our neighbors would show us the same fortuitous courtesy. If someone caught a glimpse of me dropping out of the sky, there would be big, big trouble indeed; and that was without accounting for my two decidedly non-human companions.

Instead, I opted for us to land in the forest close to Notvarpen at the south end of the fjärd. Making sure there were no boats around to spot us, we made the last bit of the descent in a reasonably sharp dive, and came to ground on the ridge of a rocky esker. I immediately recognized where we were, and sat down on the ground, eying my companions.

This was going to be hard.

“Listen up, you two. I have no idea how we wound up here, but I'm not going to waste this opportunity if I can help it. This means we'll be heading into the middle of a human settlement, however, and well...” I glanced at Chrysalis' quadruped, winged, pitch-black form, and shook my head. “We can't look like this when we're doing that.”

Chrysalis gave me a confused look at first, and then rolled her eyes. “Do you think I'm stupid, Hunter? I have worn more faces and bodies than I can count. I am a *changeling*, remember? This is what we do. How about, hm.” Green fire enveloped her body for a moment, and before I could even react she had taken on a *very* familiar form, and one that would fit right in. Disturbingly well, even.

Chrysalis was now a perfect copy of my sister Freja, in the exact outfit she'd worn when I had last seen her. The digging was obvious enough, now – there was no way she could've gotten that image from anywhere but my memories. Still, there wasn't much time to argue, and I looked to Elytra's hovering form with an expectant look in my eyes.

Surprisingly enough she didn't opt to pull another familiar face out of my memories; I suppose she noticed my disapproval at Chrysalis' choice of form. Instead the green fire simply made her a larger version of her present fairy-like body, although the black-green color scheme was swapped for a more human palette of tan skin and bright red hair. Before the fire disappeared from the rest of her body, however, her cheeks flared up a bright red, and the flames roared up again. Finally they came to rest, and Elytra emerged from within the dying sparks clad in a tight, green-black tracksuit that covered her from hand to toe.

I assumed that's what she forgot on her first try, and seeing how human she apparently was becoming already, that *would* have been quite embarrassing. I even found myself staring at her chest for a few seconds – it wasn't all too large, but the tightness of her outfit made the obvious lack of anything else underneath it a bit more obvious than I'd usually prefer.

“Right,” I said as I whipped my head away in an attempt to stop any further thoughts in that direction. “That'll do. Follow me.” The girls stumbled after me in their new forms at first, clearly unused to only having a single pair of legs to work with at first, but Elytra seemed to be getting the hang of it faster than Freja-Chrysalis. Quite soon I realized the cause of this, however, and I slapped myself in the face for forgetting that little detail that would've been so painfully obvious two days ago.

“A word, Elytra. Humans don't have wings. Unless they're in a very tacky costume, I suppose, but that's neither here nor there. Take them off. That goes for mine, too.”

Elytra sighed and gave me a pleading look, but complied. I grunted slightly as I felt my weight multiply, since the antigravity spell disappeared along with the wings on my back; however, it was hardly like this was the first time I carried this burden without help. Slightly heavier on my feet I

resumed our trek through the forest, the girls stumbling on best they could behind me.

Eventually we came clear of the fir and pine of the forest, and the small, rocky path we'd followed became first a wider, sandy path, and then after crossing one of the many murky streams that crisscrossed the landscape, a stark mat of ash-black asphalt road. The girls were visibly impressed by this, and I gestured at an old, beat-up red Volvo standing at this road's end. "That's a car, or automobile if you want to be technical. They can be pretty sturdy, but most of them are just made to drive on roads like this. I'm guessing you know what an internal combustion engine is, but in case you don't..." I tried to find a simple term that explained things in a concise enough manner that I wouldn't have to rant on all day about it. "Explosion-powered, I guess?"

Freja-Chrysalis rolled her eyes – of course she knew what an internal combustion engine was, what was I thinking – and tapped her foot against the unfamiliar surface, testing it. "Well, certainly even the simplest warrior hiveling would understand that explanation, I give you credit for that much." She regarded the old, box-like car with for a second, and then dismissed it without a second thought.

That was surprisingly easy to tell, now that I'd grown a bit more used to the strange changeling senses I shared with Elytra. With no other changelings around, there wasn't any background noise either; nothing to disturb the empathic signals that constantly kept swirling around Chrysalis, giving intricate details every time she felt something – which obviously was all the time. Every emotion was so much clearer than before, with nothing else to muddle the frequency, so to speak. This close, with her only a meter away, I thought could almost hear her thoughts word for word – preposterous, of course, but I had rejected ideas before only to be proven wrong seconds later – and for several seconds I did nothing but stand and stare into her still vivid green eyes.

Somehow, somewhere I could swear I was hearing something –

"Martin!"

My attention snapped back to reality at Chrysalis' call, and I found her staring at me with an irritated look. Abashed at having been so lost in thought, I spun on my heel and set off along the sun-parched tarmac without a word.

The tail end of the sandy beach soon became a stretch of rocks and boulders, and the slight curve of the road led us into the sparse landscape that was so typical for this type of sand-dominated soil. Thorny bushes and fir trees were scattered across the roadside, with a long thicket of blueberry bushes covering the seaward roadside to our right, and small slant-roofed houses spread out across the other.

We kept on following the road northward – Strandvägen, 'the beach road', as if the name could make the location more obvious than it already was – and though the left hand side stayed largely uniform in its spotty spread of mostly red cabins, the blueberry thicket on the other soon gave way to yet another beach, which soon became someone's lush green backyard, then a wide path with a brown mat of trampled needles, and before finally settling in as entirely dominated by houses; just at the point where the left hand side gave way to forest and undergrowth.

It's a curious place, this village. If my father had been walking with us, I could've pointed to any of the houses we passed and asked him who lived there, and he would probably have given me a long list of names, followed by a concise summary of how we're related to them – or failing that, who in this family married into which other family in the village and when, where they live during the rest of the year, when he's expecting them to come up here this summer, what boat they have and whether there are any good tennis players in the family.

Quite honestly, I don't even know the address of the house we were heading to, much less any obscure details about the other residents. Not that it'd be much help finding it, or would ever need any. There aren't exactly a lot of street signs in this place; and besides, I've known this place by heart since I was just a toddler. Change is slow and rare, and frankly the biggest differences from year to year are usually where the winter storms have hit the hardest and knocked down trees left and right.

All in all, it quite suits my definition of a summer getaway. In most ways, it *made* that definition.

This was a place that had been my haven for all the three decades I've been alive. Now, I was walking up the last hill, settling my eyes on the black timbers that we repainted two years ago, and for a moment trying not to think about two shapeshifters I had in tow or the fact that I had been soaring through the air using a power I barely understood only minutes ago.

Naturally, it was a futile effort.

We finally came to the hill's crest, and both of my companions sported looks of surprise when I motioned for them to follow me through the opening of the mashed-up green fence that marked our land. "This is the clan house," I said with a gesture toward the green-roofed cabin, "My summer villa. There's nobody here at the moment, but we stayed over midsummer, so everything is opened up for the season. We'll be safe here. Come on."

I started down the narrow, rock-lined path down the hill, and behind me my companions followed with considerable caution. Chrysalis was mostly afraid of my assumption of this place being empty being wrong, and running into more humans as a result; she could blend in with ponies easily enough, but even with the knowledge she'd absorbed on my species from me so far she'd be hard pressed to actually impersonate one, much less a family member.

Elytra was in an entirely different seat – as a member of the Scholar caste, she had never actually spent that much time outside the hives before, the expedition to Canterlot being her first major outside assignment in the field. At the same time, her scholarly oaths drew her to explore this new opportunity, and learn as much of it as she could. Inexperience and an instinctive fear for the unknown, coupled with an equal desire to *know*, pulled her back and pushed her forward in a teetering dance of the mind, and it was all I could do to not get caught up in its flows myself.

Clamping up the porch I fished up the hidden key from its usual spot, and pushed the old wooden door against its frame to let it turn all the way

around. With a *click* the old lock finally gave, and I swung the green-black door wide open, gesturing to my guests. “Ladies first.”

Naturally, none of them got the reference. They hadn't had time to dig *that* deep into my head, after all.

The first ten minutes of our unexpected stay was filled with the same as every other visit; dumping my luggage on the floor in the long hall, checking the kitchen, making sure the electricity was on, checking the water, the lot. I didn't bother with climbing up to the loft and turning on the boiler, even though I did feel an urge to take a shower now that I had the opportunity to. My head was full of questions, and before I could comfort my body, I had to comfort my mind.

While the fridge didn't have much to offer – we always made sure to eat everything that could spoil before leaving the place – I found a big box of popsicles in the freezer, and grabbed a bunch of them before closing it shut. On a whim I thrust my hand up on the shelf above the kitchen sofa where we always keep sweets, and found a bag of marshmallows and half a bar of Marabou chocolate. Taking my bounty in a firm grip I waltzed out of the kitchen, humming a tune I didn't know the words to.

All the while, the girls had been sitting quietly around the long hall's big table, obviously unused to a human posture as they struggled to get themselves comfortable in the dark, wooden chairs. I knew that exercise wouldn't keep them busy for long, however, and I was honestly surprised it took them as long as it did to speak up. With the popsicles at my side and the candy on top of the big wooden chest we used to store old newspapers in, I set to work with the best mental exercise known to man: making a fire.

I had almost finished fanning the flames to life in the ancient cast iron fireplace in the other side of the long hall when Chrysalis cleared her throat in her best imitation of a polite conversation opener, but on the inside I could plainly sense her radiating impatience and irritation like an angry cat.

“Martin. Why exactly are we here?” I was about to answer with something noncommittal about strange magical orbs when she groaned in frustration and went on. “You know that's not what I meant. Why are we *here*, in

this, *house* of yours? Why are you just sitting on your knees making fire, instead of trying to find a solution to our problem? Stars, Martin, why aren't we *doing* anything?"

I turned around for a moment and frowned at her, but even with a changeling under her skin my sister's look of disapproval didn't look any different than usual. She hadn't crossed her arms yet, but at the rate she was going I was pretty sure it was going to happen sooner or later. I gave a long sigh, and turned my attention back toward the fire. If I knew the changeling queen's mind right – which I did, unless my empathic senses were running haywire for some reason – she wasn't finished yet. So I kept pumping the bellows at the red-hot flames, quickening their progress towards becoming a decently usable coal bed as much as I could manage.

"Um. Martin." Naturally, I had once again managed to forget about Elytra. Honestly, how a man can forget about someone he shares his own mind with, I don't know either. That's just how it was. "I don't understand this either. I mean, I know that you're troubled by something, but what does that have to do with lighting a fire? Or any of this?" She let out a worried sigh, and I felt a pang of sadness from the young changeling. "I thought I had finally started to understand you," she murmured, as if talking to herself.

I kept my gaze on the flames, but I put the bellows down and seated myself on an old, smooth log stool. "I needed some time to think. That's why we're here." I could easily sense neither changeling was satisfied in the least with that sort of vague answer, so I went on. "How did we turn up *here*? Dimensions aside, this place is far southeast of Sarek, and we spent all of yesterday flying southwest." I grabbed a poker from the wooden bucket at my side, and started breaking the half-burnt logs up into smaller coals. "Besides, Chrysalis. You said this was *our* problem. And maybe, for you and Elytra, that's true. But..."

I turned around, and looked the surprised changeling queen straight in the eyes. She had never expected this, that much was clear on her face – and my other set of senses told the same story, with even more clarity. "If I'm honest with you, this little world-jumping issue isn't a problem for me. I'm *home*. No matter how I got back, I'm *home*. I even have the luck to be in a place I know fairly well. I could take one of the bikes in the shed, be at

the train station in an hour or two, and in another four I'd be home at my parents' house. Everything that'd be left of this strange journey would be my confused expedition party asking me how the hell I wound up down here when they eventually get out of Sarek, my own fucked-up memories..."

I sighed, and directed an angry stare at my backpack. "A strange, magical crystal that nobody knows anything about, oh, and a pair of shapeshifting aliens. Those last two, right there at the end, *those* are my problem right now. And I'm trying my bloody damn best to figure out what to do about it. What to do with you guys. What to do with the Mercury Star. What to do with all...this."

I gave another angry sigh, and spun around to face the fire again. Another small thought made itself known, however, and I grunted. "I also need a hairbrush. Badly. I would never have thought flying was that...windy."

Naturally, I should've kept that last part to myself. A word of advice to you guys? Keep the girls out of your head if you can, but more importantly keep them out of what's *on* it.

"Your mane is so...I really like it." Elytra purred happily as she took another stroke with the brush she'd produced from practically nowhere – that was probably a standard changeling spell, *transmute hairbrush* or something – and I hissed painfully as the not-at-all delicate movements tortured my skull. I tried to keep my focus on the bellows and the fire, ignoring as much as I could of Elytra sitting on the wooden floor behind me and doing her best to tear my scalp off.

Obviously, it didn't go too well. The smug feeling radiating from Chrysalis, who had claimed one of the big lounge chairs facing the fireplace, did nothing to help.

"It's not a bloody– AAAJ! Fans jävla– Is this your idea of revenge? I tell you the truth and just because you don't like it you try tearing my bloody head off with a stick? Is that it? I had better ideas than this when I was *eight*! Blood and death! Why do girls *always* want to mess with my bloody hair? Not even being a different *species* makes it any better – if

anything, it only makes it even *worse* because you *IDIOTS HAVE NO IDEA HOW TO BRUSH A HUMAN'S BLOODY HAIR!*"

At some point during my angry rant the torture had stopped, and I whipped my head around wielding a murderous expression. Elytra was staring at me with a hurt, wide-eyed look, but Chrysalis didn't have a single shred of emotion about her. "Are you quite finished?"

I hissed, and after a second's thought grabbed the hairbrush in Elytra's hand. "Give me that!" With a startled squeak, she let it go. I gathered the gold-blonde mess of hair over my shoulder, working it through stroke for stroke with the brush in one hand and a firm grip on the whole mass in the other to keep it from tearing my scalp off. "Just because I wear it in a ponytail doesn't make it horsehair, you bloody..." I grumbled on as I slowly made my way through the knots and tangles one by one, matching the fire's roar with my sizzling rage.

And on the hearthstone's blackened edge, three popsicles were melting away, forgotten by all but the fire.

Entry #12 - Stella Magica

Stella Magica

Entry #12

2nd of July, 11:20

Long hall, Clan Winter seaside villa

Temperature 24° C, Wind Speed 6 m/s W

Clear skies

I sat by the fireplace in a bathrobe, shivering hard. Strange you might think, what with the sweltering heat and all, but as it turned out I had made a very bad decision in neglecting to turn on the boiler when we arrived. A cold shower was never nice in the least, even if you had half a sauna to go back to once you were out. Though that admittedly made the deal somewhat less unappealing, it was hardly like having an actual sauna available. Ever since the cold drenching rain this morning I'd been craving a sauna something terrible, and the closest one I knew about and could get into was some three hundred kilometers away, back at my parents' apartment.

Sometimes, life decides to be really, really inconvenient, and there is nothing you can do about it.

My skin felt slick. The cold water being what it was, I had simply mashed whatever conditioner and shampoo was available into some arbitrary witch brew of hair care, and not really bothered rinsing it all off properly. In all likelihood I'd just get it all frizzed up again as soon as we took off, which was bound to happen eventually. It wasn't worth wasting time – and body heat – on something that'd just be undone the moment I left the ground.

The shower had, at least, helped cool off my temper a bit. I wasn't seething with anger at my changeling companions anymore, even though there was a

fair bit of irritation lingering still. That much they could obviously sense, but with my seemingly irrational mood swings fresh in their memories I suppose it wasn't all too strange that they kept their distance anyway.

The important part – for me, at least – was that I'd found my thoughts again. Right there in the freezing cold of the shower, icy water dunking me relentlessly as I struggled to get almost a week's worth of hiking out of my system, I realized what had to be done. It wasn't an easy decision to make, and I'd never been happy about making sacrifices; but even so, it had to be done.

Because, if nothing else, I'd made a promise. Well, more like a deal, but still; and as far as that deal went, my part was still unfulfilled, whereas the changelings had been good on their word from the first hour. Now was not the time to break things up. I had given my word, and if I reneged on it now I would at the very least be haunted by a guilty conscience. At worst, I'd find my life – maybe even this entire world, if ambition got the better of the queen again – threatened to the brink of collapse by two shape-shifting aliens with mysterious magical powers, who had already extracted plenty of knowledge from my previously oh so carefully guarded brain. What did they know? What didn't they know? Did I want to risk finding out?

Did I even want to let them down in the first place?

I've never had much love for traitors, and becoming one myself wasn't an idea that entertained me at all. Sure, growing all too attached to someone that inevitably would end up separated from yourself by a directional jaunt or two wasn't the brightest idea, but it'd hardly hurt to avoid ending up with a debt you could never settle either.

All possibilities of mind-reading aside, however, it seemed like I had to make the first move. Heaving a sigh I stood up, turned around –

And of course they were both gone.

Cursing my lack of attentiveness I felt for Elytra's presence in my mind, and formed my thoughts. "Elytra. Chrysalis too, if she's there. I need to talk to you both."

And of course I hadn't even bothered to look around the house, either. Or use my ears, for that part. I heard a pair of giggles from the corridor, and swooped into the kitchen with an unamused face. The changelings were sitting on the old wooden couch wearing equally dumb smiles, and the table was littered with popsicle wrappers, with a few unopened ones spread about. The previously half-full box laid upended and empty in the sink.

"COME ON! MY ICECREAM!"

The changelings burst out in a fit of raucous laughter, but I paid them no heed; instead I dashed forward to rescue as many of the endangered popsicles from their grasp as was possible. Only after I'd managed to gather almost every single one of them up without interruption – aside from the constant assault on my ears, of course – did I realize something was off. Stuffing the sweets back in the freezer I turned around to face them, and took stock of their appearances.

If you've ever seen a far-gone crackhead in the middle of that last overdose that's going to kill him in a few minutes, you know how the changelings looked right then.

It took several minutes before they were back down on the earth again, but at least I managed to figure out what they'd been doing. Faced with the risk of being unable to return to the swarm, and possibly with the threat of me abandoning them, the girls had decided to try their hand at transmuting human food – starting off with popsicles – into forms of energy suitable for their magical metabolism, in case they needed a substitute. While the first few tries gave rather sub-par yield, it turns out that sugar is rather suitable to transmute into the emotional energy corresponding to – who could have guessed – joy. Cue two changelings shooting up with their newfound drug until their source is completely depleted, while I'm busy brooding in the long hall.

I really hope those ponies haven't invented refined sugar yet, or they're going to have an army of changeling hippies bearing down on them before long.

"I'm...really sorry, Martin," Chrysalis said with a clearly ashamed expression on her face. This didn't stop her from letting out yet another giggle right after, and I sighed in resignation. Clearly the aftershocks from their little trip would go on for a while.

Elytra was even less restrained, and I couldn't sense a speck of shame from her. "We did it for *science!*" she blurted before breaking out in an unrestrained laughing fit that made Chrysalis blush furiously, trying her best not to give in to the enormous temptation of doing the same herself.

I simply stood there fingering my beard, waiting for this new storm to pass. A pastime that I, over the last few days, had grown *utterly* sick of.

Eventually Elytra got far enough out of her sugar high – so to speak – to regain her senses as well. "I'm sorry for taking all your popsicles, Martin. That doesn't change the fact that it was an important experiment, though! I'm not going to apologize for that."

I figured that was as far as she'd go and accepted her apology with a shrug, before sitting down at the now significantly less messy kitchen table. "Ladies, we need to talk." I waited for a pair of nods in acknowledgment before continuing. "I think I may have figured out a way to get us back."

That was of course not what I'd meant to talk about, and quite as expected this resulted in two very surprised changelings staring at me. The truth of it was that I'd figured it out somewhere in the midst of my little outburst, but filed it away; because of this Elytra had never picked up on it, and I'd managed to conceal the fact until now by simply not thinking about it. It was a quite novel way of thought, really, and one I'd come up with on sheer impulse after a few turns of having my every word predicted by either the changeling that could actually read my mind, or the one that couldn't read my mind but could read the mind of the one who could, and besides was experienced enough in reading people's emotions that it wasn't much of a handicap anyway.

Almost like encryption, now that I think about it.

I raised my hand to stop them from breaking out in a million questions before continuing. “Yes, I know, that wasn't the part I was going to begin with, but you've figured that one out already, so I thought I might as well go right ahead to the good stuff. Basically, the Mercury Star is what got us here, yes? If we recreate the process that powered it up in the first place, we should be able to reverse the jump and return to your world. Simple, no?”

The girls' expressions – and the feelings I sensed from them – were mixed. Relieved; natural, since I'd just assuaged their fears of getting abandoned in a foreign world. Hopeful, having been given at least a straw to grasp on, a chance of getting back no matter how crude and uncalculated the method was. But also doubtful, because of that same crudeness; and afraid, fearful of the consequences of using the great magical artifact once again.

“But...” Elytra began. “You said your problems were solved, now that you're back in your world. Won't you just be reversing that progress by going back? How are you even supposed to return here a second time?”

That, however, was an argument I'd seen coming, and the answer was as logical as it was simple. “Come now, Elytra, you can do better than that. Now we know that there's a way to return to my world – by using the Mercury Star. Even if me being brought across the first time was a fluke, we now have a method of doing it by choice. As long as we keep our hands on the Mercury Star, I can stay for however long I need to, and go back when I'm finished with my business over there. And for now, that business entails getting you two – and the rest of the changelings – back to your home. I may not be an altruist in any sense, but I will *not* become a traitor. That, you can trust in.”

Silence reigned for a few seconds, until Chrysalis finally spoke up. “Well, Martin. I thank you for your encouraging words. I must say, though, that you seem awfully confident in your ability to control an artifact you know next to nothing about. For all you know, the Mercury Star might be as fickle as the element it represents – Change itself – and using it as random as the roll of a dice. What says you'll get the result you wish for?”

I smirked in response. “Maybe so. But as the old adage of empirical science says, *you never know until you try*, do you?” I leaned towards the table with my fingers crossed, looking her in the eye. “Besides, you’re awfully insistent on saying it might be so from what *I* know, and what *I* do. You’re just about saying out loud that you know something about this artifact that I don’t and the fact that you’re not outright against the idea tells me that it’s most likely going to work. You,” I concluded, tilting my head slightly, “are just trying to steal credit for a theory you weren’t brave enough to suggest yourself, now that you’ve got another man’s logic backing it up as well.”

For a moment Chrysalis bore an indignant grimace, which looked highly out of place to me where it was, planted squarely on my sister’s face. Then her rage was washed away under the tidal waves of her ongoing sugar high – so to speak – and she gave up a defeated sigh. “Fine, Hunter, whatever. I don’t feel like even bothering to argue. It’s so...pointless.” She sunk down, deflating like a balloon, and lay her head on the table.

Quite apparently changelings become placid creatures in the aftershocks of a sugar high – so to speak – because simply put, nothing can get them excited.

Seeing this opportunity to interrogate the queen a bit – as you might remember, my last attempt ended up going rather south for me because she caught on to what I was doing and got mad – I stood up, planting my palms on the table. “So, tell me. What do you know about the Mercury Star?”

Chrysalis sighed again. “Not much, really.” Her tone was decidedly uninterested, but I urged her to go on. “There’s no record whatsoever of the Mercury Star specifically, not in any memories I have. However, the other one you mentioned appearing – the Venus Star – does have a brief mention, in a record of emissaries to the Crystal Empire. It was an old state in the north, that vanished after a conflict between its ruler – one King Sombra, which may or may not have been related to the spectre that you encountered – and the princesses Luna and Celestia. In any case, the Crystal Empire records mention a grand feast in the capital, venerating an object known as the Crystal Heart. Which we now know is also known as the Venus Star.”

Her lethargy gradually lifting as she spoke, she finally raised her head a bit, though only to plant it in her hands. Sensing she was going to keep talking for a while, I sat down again. A rather subtle thing, true, but there is a definite difference in *intent* between a speaker with a concise point and one that's going to stray into minutes of explanation.

“There's not much about the powers of the Star itself, but we know that unicorns in the Empire were fairly few in number; thus, it seems likely we can conclude that most of the capital's mysteries can be explained by the Star.” She raised a finger. “According to our observation, they were as follows. First, ponies' appearances were somewhat altered within the capital. Light reflected strangely and even penetrated most surfaces, like glass; everything within the capital seemed to gain prismatic properties, to some degree. In short – and this is likely what made them name their little Empire that way in the first place – everything took on a somewhat crystalline appearance.”

Another finger raised. “Second, energy radiated from the heart of the capital – the castle, which can be assumed was the seat of the Star. Astral energy; love, as ponies would sense it. This caused great harmony among the Empire's subjects, since they had little to no discontent thanks to what was likely the power of the Star. Our observer was more than slightly reluctant to let go of something like that, but in the end he couldn't locate the source of the energy...” Chrysalis' eyes narrowed slightly. “If you'd only gotten your hands on the Crystal Heart instead... Well, never mind.”

“Third – and this is the big part – it nurtured the land itself, in and around the capital. Despite its location far in the north the Empire never had so much as a day of harsh winter, and crops were always plenty. From the late end of autumn, almost at year's end, lasted six months of spring. Flowers budded at the new year's coming, and all the trees had sprouted leaves one month after that. My guess,” she said as she finally sat back up, “is that the primary natural element of love-based magic – that of the earth and the living – and the abundance of earth ponies – who by all evidence have further affinity for that element – in the Empire worked as two forces in tandem to create this great prosperity, defying even winter itself from going its course.”

I sensed her realizing that she'd strayed a bit from the topic at hand, and she shook her head a bit. "In any case. The Crystal Empire is mentioned even in the very oldest entries of the Mercurial Archives, which confirms that it predates the existence of the changeling species. Information is sparse after that, but it is mentioned – if only in passing – in a number of entries after that, and the Sombrian War was not until at least a century or two after we changelings first managed to establish our civilization. It seems unlikely that it would've fallen and been rebuilt multiple times under the same name; additionally, the stability that the Venus Star's powers would have offered the state could indeed have allowed it to survive those turbulent times unscathed. Thus, the Crystal Empire existed for a minimum of five hundred years, during which we can assume the Venus Star's powers remained constant. At very least its power of abundance must have, since that is what let the Empire exist so far north in the first place; and seeing that the other two are far lesser in scope, it can be safely assumed they were constant as well."

She sighed, leaning back against the wall. "Sure, it does seem rather ironic that an artifact embodying the lack of constants is itself – to some degree – constant, but that's the only conclusion I can make from the data we have."

Yes, she said that. *Data*. I mean, I had expected – and experienced – some osmosis of traits over to Elytra, but hearing Chrysalis gradually start talking like Elytra, before then slipping over into my own speech pattern was more than just a bit unnerving. Was it because we were isolated from the rest of the hive, and she didn't have any other minds to link with? Either way, it took plenty of focus for me to refrain from bursting out at her in surprise; no doubt that'd have accomplished nothing but to stop my interrogation short.

Gods' twilight, dealing with royalty is bloody annoying.

Shaking my head, I stood up again, gesturing toward the kitchen door. "Well then, what are we waiting for? I don't imagine any of you have any business to conduct in this world, and I'm mostly finished with mine. The swarm is bound to worry if we remain lost, so would do wisely in getting on or way as quickly as we can." With that said, I sauntered over to the pantry, grabbed a bag of peanuts, and made for the long hall. I didn't need to

turn around to check if the girls were following me; which, thankfully, they did without a second thought.

-/-/-

We were seated on the steps of the black-painted porch, the sun shining mellowly down on our faces. It would've been comfortable, were it not for the fact that we'd been doing so for quite a while now; and strange as it may seem testing mysterious magic, while being a fairly stationary activity, is not exactly very relaxing. Going back into the house wasn't an option either; I'd made very clear to the girls that under no circumstances would *my* property – well, skirting the truth a bit there I suppose, but still – be put at risk of being blown to pieces or whatever else the Star might come up with. They'd hardly take well to if I left them alone either, so there I was, stuck on the porch in the heat that would only grow as the sun neared its zenith, idly munching down peanuts and chocolate like an oversized squirrel.

Finally, I sensed a change in the tight bundle of concentrated emotions in the back of my head, and I looked up. "I think..." Elytra began, before noticing the beading sweat on her forehead and clawing it away like it was a live viper. Understandable, perhaps – changelings don't sweat – but yet another piece of evidence showing just how alien these circumstances were to her. She shook her head, and tried again. "I think I've got it."

Chrysalis and I both shone up at this – we'd spent the last hour or so trying to figure out just what had made the Star react the way it had, and how to replicate it. Urged by our emotions Elytra gave a tired smile of her own, before rushing into her customary explanation of her discovery. "I looked through our memories of the flight, just before the crystal activated. I've gone through the exact spell forms used and the energy fluctuations of the Star, and, oh." Faced with a pair of looks clearly spelling *please not now*, Elytra's mood sunk a bit, before shaking her head. "Anyway, I did few experiments, and the initial fluxes are identical in nature. Using this form, we should be able to activate the Mercury Star and get back to the swarm."

Thankful to her for not mentioning the fact that most likely we'd never have gotten into this mess if I had stopped when Chrysalis had called out to me, I

nodded approval to my companions and stood up, putting the remaining half kilogram of peanuts in my pack before slinging it on and strapping myself in. I was just about to tell them to get ready for takeoff, when the small, nagging bit of my mind known as *conscience* announced its existence to the world, and the necessity of taking a few choice actions before once more leaving this dimension for another.

Namely, reminding the human world that I was – by and large – still well and alive.

I dug through the top flap of my pack and produced my trusty nokia cellphone, and turned it on. Tapping the pin code I spent a moment or two regarding messages I needed to send, before putting my fingers to work on the blessed buttons of the device. I've never really liked touchscreens, to be honest.

<Hi guys. I'm okay, but I'll remain unreachable for a while. Not in Sarek anymore, so no need to bother looking for me there. See you all in a few days or so. Probably. //Martin>

Marking all the expedition members as recipients, I sent the message off, blessing the newly erected telephone mast for the reception. Until just recently, phone coverage with most operators had been sloppy at best in the village.

“We're ready to go,” I decreed, and my companions sounded their agreement. I took a few moments to ensure the fire was firmly put out along with any lamps in the house, before locking the door and returning the key to its hiding place. A sense of relief washed over me as I felt the comforting presence of my wings return, and the lessened pull of the earth that came with it.

However, one point of tension remained: the Mercury Star. Elytra had kept it enclosed in a tightly wrapped gray cloth that she'd conjured up, even during her experiments; she for all the theoretical debate we'd had on it she still hadn't at all gotten over the events of last night, and I honestly couldn't blame her. If I knew as much about magic as she did, I'd likely still be shaking in my boots as well.

As it was, she was full of hesitant caution when she handed me the wrapping – it somehow felt metallic, like a very fine mesh of chain mail rather than fabric – and I'm not going to deny that I felt pretty apprehensive in that moment. It was with considerable steeling of my heart that I reached for it with my hands, and undid the wrapping.

The Star was shining again. Perhaps not as brightly as it had been when we first found it, but that may just have the fact that it was now midday rather than midnight. Its light was shimmering, as if coming from below the surface of a calm lake. Shimmering, and somehow... *expectant*. If it wasn't for the fact that this very emotion was bounding all around my companions' minds alongside their caution and fear, I could've sworn I felt it from the star itself. As if it wanted to be used – as if its magic had a mind of its own.

Shaking my doubts as well as I could, I grabbed the orb firmly in both hands, and raised it into the air. Just like last night, it was almost entirely weightless. Now that I was holding it, I could feel my own feet starting to lose their grip of the ground without a single flap of my wings.

The Star was ready, and I wasn't entirely sure we were – but for better or worse, we had to be. "Hold on to my arms or something," I mumbled absentmindedly to the girls, trying not to freak out too much about the fact that I was once again defying gravity using a force outside my own control.

Elytra did short work of that, transforming back to her small form in a flash of green and planting herself on my head once again, holding my ponytail in a tight grip. My own fear was rebounding in hers, and while it was hard enough for me to avoid getting too deep into that loop, she was obviously fighting a losing battle.

Chrysalis, to my surprise, wasn't struggling nearly as much. With just a bit of a jump to clear the few decimeters of air already separating me from the ground, she clasped her own hands around mine; only barely avoiding contact with the Star itself. Quite evidently this was far too close for comfort, however, as she instantly drew a frantic gasp and let go, dropping down to the ground again. Humiliation ran deep in her, but she steeled herself best she could again before simply taking hold of my legs. A brief look of amazement settled on her face as the sensation of weightlessness

spread to her as well, but that didn't bother her for long. Instead, she simply started moving up the rungs, so to speak, before finally clasping her hands around my waist, her body tightly pressed against mine to distance herself from the Star as much as possible.

In this moment, I was fairly certain the situation couldn't get much worse – or more awkward, for that matter. As you all know by this point, I never was a very good judge on that sort of stuff. In full accordance with every paragraph of Murphy's Law but in total defiance of any remaining common sense applicable, *my phone started ringing*.

A moment of panic was replaced by a sudden urge to repair my half-shattered connections to the world I'd known before, and I let go of the Star with one hand to reach into my pocket to retrieve the device. I gave the screen a single glance, and reading the caller ID felt like being stabbed.

Incoming call from: Winter Freja (Mobil)

I didn't hesitate half a second before accepting the call, and pressing the speaker to my ear.

<"Yeah, hello?">

A clearly frustrated cry was heard from the other side, before my sister's voice tuned up. <"Martin! What the fuck are you doing? Where are you?">

As she spoke I realized how disconcerting it was to have her splitting image clinging silently onto my waist while her voice rung in my ear, and just how much I'd relied on the changelings' empathic abilities since I'd got them. I couldn't sense a thing from her across the phone – obviously – and it irked me something terrible. I shook my head, and gave the Star a worried glance; its light shone back at me shimmering faster than before, as if impatient. I decided to keep it brief.

<"I'm okay! Stop worrying! I'm pretty busy right now, though, so keep it short! Did you make it out of the national park already?">

< "We're still in Sarek – halfway up on Spijkka. Aaron said we could get signal up on the mountain, but the weather was too rough for us to try yesterday. We were just about to get back to basecamp when I got your message. And what do you mean, busy? Where the hell did you go? You just up and vanished after we got across the bridge!">

The Star was sparkling irritably now, just about holding in its power – whether it was Elytra's magic or the Star's own in control, I couldn't tell – and a slight sense of panic came upon me as the only link to my old reality was about to be washed away.

<"I don't have time to talk about it, I gotta go! Listen, don't waste time looking for me! Don't call the mountain rangers or the cops for that part either! I'm fine, really! But keep yourselves out of trouble! Don't go chasing after fog! Eat and sleep properly, and don't walk down jokks – tell Loa and Osvald I said that! And make sure – seriously! – to **keep an eye on the sky!**">

I just about had time to jam the phone back into my pocket before my hand was pulled back to grasp the Star again, as if by some arcane magnet. With a glaring burst the orb came to life, and we shot into the air like a shining bullet. For a brief moment I saw the ground fleeing from me at a frightening pace, before the world once again was consumed by a dazzling blue light.

-/-/-

As it happened, Murphy had finally deemed my sentence served. The swarm had coped with our absence better than we – well, mostly Chrysalis – had feared, and thanks to my outburst last night there hadn't been anyone in even remote danger of running low on food. While getting everyone in order to leave naturally took some time, the changelings were efficient; and, perhaps more importantly, nobody wanted to remain in this mysterious place for too long.

It was probably a good thing that nobody told them that we were bringing the real cause of this morning's incident with us, or my plan for a way back home might've come under severe pressure. The Mercury Star had calmed down when we arrived – just short of a hundred meters above ground, this

time – but to be safe, I'd returned it to the wrappings Elytra had made for it before putting it in my pack.

Even so, it was with a dark, brooding mood that I took to the skies once the swarm was ready to follow. I had expected the artifact to be powerful, and I had accepted the possibility of it being quite strange. I had *not* expected it to start acting less like a *something* and more like a *someone*. A very willful someone, at that, and with more than enough force to enact those fancies.

The Mercury Star had become my one hope and my greatest foe in one fell swoop, and as a man who appreciates clear enemies more than a multitude of friends, I was not feeling happy at all. Murphy may have let me off the hook, but he'd left one hell of a mess behind – and now it was all up to me to clean it up.

And hell knows how much I hate cleaning...

Entry #13 - Cadens Lucem

Cadens Lucem

Entry #13

3rd of July, 02:36

Location: Foothills of Mount Cresting, the Crystal Mountains

520m ASL, Clear sky

Temperature 11° C, Wind Speed 4 m/s S

My head was not being merciful to me this night.

We had kept going rather late into the evening yesterday to make up for the morning's lost time, not making camp until the sun finally decided to go down on us. That aside, the scouts had finally managed to determine our position; the peak we'd finally landed on was apparently situated square on the northern border of Equestria, almost exactly two flights north of Canterlot.

Feelings were mixed among the swarm. On one hand there was immense relief, now that we were no longer lost in the wilderness. On the other, as Chrysalis so aptly had put it before giving her subjects leave to rest:

“We are now in enemy territory. I know you are all relieved to be out of the unknown lands of the Frozen North – regardless of how terribly ill-fitting that name is – but do not make the mistake of letting your guard down. One slip here, and we may lose the entire swarm. The ponies do not forget easily, so neither must we.”

I had tucked myself in, my mind mostly stuck in thoughts of home – seeming ever so much closer now, after what happened yesterday – and for once, I'd actually managed to forget about the half of my mind that wasn't

really *mine*. It had become a lot easier to do, with Elytra in a body of her own and all, but suffice to say that ignoring the presence of what amounts to a full set of muscles in your body that move on your own – except it's in your head, but you get my point – is not something you can easily accomplish. Even this time around it was probably mostly due to exhaustion, and magical exhaustion at that. Which wasn't even my own in the first place.

Aye, there's the rub.

Sleep fled me, but the strange dream stayed where it was, firmly chiseled into my memory.

On one hand, there probably wouldn't be anyone who'd be overjoyed at me waking them in the middle of the night because I had a bad – well, weird at least – dream. On the other, I remembered the images Elytra had shown me, from these “Mercurial Archives” or whatever it was.

More importantly, I remember the emotions going through her while doing so. A scholar like her, with the oldest piece of history their species had – she revered every second of that memory, and I'd be damned if Chrysalis didn't value them just as much herself.

Sure, it might well be that my mind – for some reason – decided to start making me randomly dream about ancient changeling history, and all that I'd seen tonight was just an elaborate fabrication.

Except. The dream remained clear in my head. Too clear – no dream would ever have stayed for this long, not to this extent.

Except. It was just that bit *too* strange of a dream for me to have made it up, while also being just that bit *too real* to seem like a believable dream. It wasn't a choppy, jumpy mishmash of scenes that didn't make sense – it was a single long cohesive...*memory*.

Except...

I rubbed the back of my head. I hadn't thought of it when I went to sleep, but now that I could feel how sore I'd got, I was definitely regretting my own lack of awareness on the point. I'd been sleeping with something round and hard under my head, and there was exactly *one* thing in my entire pack that fit that description.

The Mercury Star.

And the Mercurial Archives. Just how dumb I'd been not to make *that* painfully obvious connection right away, I'm not sure. Other things to think of, I suppose. Chrysalis probably had – likely that was the reason she'd been so hesitant to use the thing.

There wouldn't be any big important discussions this night, however. Chrysalis was sleeping soundly – ever since yesterday morning, she'd been present in the back of my mind like a small knot of emotions. Much like Elytra, but very different at the same time. And Elytra herself was down and out, just like she had been since only hours after we returned to the swarm yesterday; using her magic that much had quite apparently taken its toll on her. She was back in her original quadruped form, snoozing away a few meters to the side of my sleeping bag.

That ruled out the entirety of the changeling population that I was more personally acquainted with, and I really needed someone to vent a bit on. This was getting a bit too much, even for my standards.

In hopes of finding one of the swarm's scouts, I unzipped my sleeping bag and untied my sandals from my pack, putting them on. In the half-light of the borderline dawn I had no trouble spotting my target circling above the camp; I sprung up into the air and let my wings surge out, eagerly welcoming the pleasant sensation of near-weightlessness the magic brought with it.

I was several meters up in the air before I realized what I'd done. Or, more accurately, what I *hadn't* done: namely, filing a humble request to Elytra to use her magic on me before I started flying.

I have been a rather staunch atheist for the most part of my life, and what faith I have had has been in the clear and obvious fact that the world works against me. Surely, if realistic pessimism was a religion, none would have accused me of heresy.

So it was a decidedly unfamiliar thought that took considerable time to process, before I could finally realize what it was; I was worried for my soul. Quite evidently I had one, as had been proven several times these last few days. And just as evidently, it was no longer possible to define it as human.

In hindsight I should maybe have realized the occurring change earlier. The ever growing sense of familiarity with the swarm, the near-telepathic connection to Chrysalis I felt at times...

And the fact that I had fused my soul with that of a *changeling*, the day before finding the magical element of *change*, the night before using said element to *change* dimensions twice in a matter of hours, the day before I finally wake up one early morning and feel *extremely* stupid for not catching on. Again. Being a realist in a fantastical world does sort of... throw off your sense of direction, sometimes.

This was no time to be thrown off guard, however, and as I idly swept through the air on wings of stolen magic I rummaged through my memories – or were they Elytra's? – of changeling society. I had known for some time that Chrysalis had some sort of control, some kind of hive-mind connection to the swarm under her; I'd never bothered gathering the specifics of it, simply because it hadn't exactly seemed relevant at the time. Well, fool me once, and I'll beat your nose in the second time you try something weird, as the saying goes. Now that I was standing with one foot practically within the swarm's ranks, I figured it was better to inform myself before someone pulled a fast one on me. If there was one thing in life I was never suited – or willing – to be, it was caged and enslaved into servitude.

Inclusion, it's called. On one hand, it's not so bad as one might think – the connection is one-way, and is essentially a flow of information from hiveling to hivelord. A form of tax, I suppose, for the sustenance they provide, since changeling society is largely non-material. Essentially,

Chrysalis can – theoretically – see and hear everything that the swarm does or thinks. Sort of explains the lack of criminality Elytra mentioned – she struggled to understand a few of my memories, and explanations had to be made – if you know someone could potentially be watching not only your every move, but your *thoughts* as well, from inside your own head, well, even the most hard-boiled rebel would think twice before breaking the law.

But as you may have guessed, I didn't have much of an interest in sacrificing my freedom of thought either. There wasn't much I could do about the current situation, except one thing: hurry up and get Chrysalis to her kingdom so I could get back home, before this whole *soul* deal got any worse. That, and try to figure out some way to keep this power for my own.

Suddenly, venting my ever-growing list of worries to some random night patrol didn't seem like such a good idea anymore, and I flew a few laps around the camp in silence. Going back to sleep would take a while – being an insomniac isn't fun – but hopefully Elytra wouldn't go rummaging too deep in my memories of this night, and failing that she'd hopefully just write whatever she found off as dreams. Changelings dream too, I know as much from experience.

Besides, I'd hardly be able to get much else done. I could feel the strange *pull* on what I could only presume was my soul, drawing me towards the center of the camp where Elytra was sleeping. It wasn't exactly painful per se, but from the way my entire being felt like it was being *stretched* whenever I strayed a bit too far from my other half, I suspected it wouldn't be particularly comfortable if I tried to put any further distance between us. If I even could bring myself to do it, that was.

With thoughts of chains and paranoia blending with my newfound thirst for magical power, I finally made land a few meters away from my pack, and – with a sigh of regret escaping my lips – dispelled my wings and their magic. Trying not to think too hard about anything, I navigated myself into the verdant nylons of my sleeping bag, and closed my eyes.

Sleep did not, of course, come quickly. Unless I'm physically exhausted, I seldom have that luxury. What I did was the same as I had for many years of sleepless nights; focusing my senses inward and moving not muscles, but

the nerves themselves. It was the base of the usual meditative exercise I did when I couldn't find sleep fast enough, stimulating skin and muscle with neural impulses stronger and more plentiful than normal, sending prickling tingles through my body until my entire being was like a constant, static shiver. Dark colors swirled before my closed eyes, forming images I knew I should recognize but couldn't quite grasp.

As sleepiness eventually took me, a nagging suspicion growing in my mind made itself heard. Somehow, I was almost sure that my little exercise had some connection to this new, strange magic I'd gained. Magic, at once so very alien yet so familiar I hadn't even realized it was my own until now. I was missing something, here. Some small connection that once found would seem painfully obvious, but until then would sit content haunting me with its presence from the sidelines of my mind.

I fell into an uneasy second slumber filled with strange dreams of the vision from my first, and ominous whispers of powers mercurial.

-/-/-

One thing I certainly had not expected was to wake up in a darkness deeper than the one I fell asleep in. It was one thing to do that in deepest winter, when you spent the five-or-so bright hours of the day mired indoors with work or studies; to do so at the height of summer, when not even the darkest night quite managed to be black, was perplexing. Naturally once my brain started thinking logically again I reached a rather simple conclusion; barring yet another sudden dimensional hop, I had either managed to sleep through an entire day, or someone had blindfolded me.

Just when I'd stopped having to sleep with a shirt across my face, too. Bloody typical.

On instinct I tried to brush whatever it was away from my face, but when I only found my own bare skin with my hands, I started to feel a certain amount of doubt in my theory. What exactly was going on here?

I was just about to voice that thought, when I heard Elytra – back inside my head, for once. *Don't make any sounds, Martin. We have to be quiet.*

Certainly not the morning call I'd expected. Shifting my voice to the sort of telepathic kind Elytra used wasn't easy; I'd never had to bother with it before, and forming coherent words in your head actually takes a bit of practice before you can get it done with any reasonable ease. *Good morning to you too, grumpyface. Did Chrysalis decide to bring the sky down on our heads or something?*

The mental equivalent of a head-shake was sent my way, and my companion's "voice" returned. *An Equestrian border patrol got here. The scouts gave enough warning for the swarm to break camp, but pegasi are faster than changelings. The queen took the others and went ahead, but we couldn't wake you in time to get you flying without being spotted. So we're hiding from the patrol. I transmuted the mountain on top of us; we're lying under a small rock at the moment.*

Slowly my mind caught up to what she was talking about, and my changeling senses – not Elytra's, as I had first assumed – confirmed the fact. Muted bundles of emotion wavered around above us, dominated by vigilance and curiosity. In all but one of them, at least – the last of the bundles shared parts of those feelings, but was otherwise completely *brimming* with the burning light of love.

Well, the energy generated by that emotion, at least. It was decidedly hard to focus on that sort of rationality, though, with the changeling equivalent of a giant tub of ice cream in front of me. Not that I got much of an urge to gorge myself or anything, but because Elytra's emotions were going all haywire on me.

So why aren't you just feasting away, then? Why are you holding yourself back? I thought at my companion, who seemed quite surprised at my words.

Are you an idiot? She would notice! You have felt for yourself how it is to be fed upon. It may not be painful per se, but it is definitely noticeable. And before you ask, this one knows the feeling of it, and what it means. I've felt that signature, even seen her, before. She was in Canterlot during the invasion. A brief pause, and a small measure of shame made its way into her tone. *She was the Queen's target.*

An image entered his mind, of a pink-and-violet pony with feathery wings and a horn encircled by a small tiara, shining with a dazzling light and staring defiantly toward him as he – no, Elytra, since it was her memory – tumbled through the air at breakneck speed, desperately trying to regain control of her flight. A few more, less dramatic views of the Princess Cadence flashed by, along with a brief flash of her name on a profile in some dark-brown musky paper folder, but I didn't pay much attention. Much like everything the Internet serves, changeling information comes in much greater amounts than you usually need, so I'd grown used to filtering things away.

And so I did, until I realized that I'd seen the mark on her flank before. Or to be precise, I'd seen the object that her flank-mark depicted before. Two nights back, in fact.

It was the Venus Star.

Elytra, we need to get a hold of that princess.

Naturally, this only riled her up further. *You are insane! I just showed you that she's got enough power to swat away the entire changeling swarm like a bunch of flies and send them halfway across the planet with the wave of a hoof! And you want us to go after her? Why?*

Her frustrated outburst made it hard for me to form words inside my head, what with her jittery mess of fear and desire leaking over so much; so I gave her the quietest whisper I could manage. “She has the Venus Star stamped on her flank. I don't know what it means, but I intend to find out.”

I probably had my changeling senses to thank for delaying the onset of claustrophobia until that point. I could feel the air bouncing back from the earth covering us, only a few centimeters above my head, and the echo was eerily quick in its bounces. I steeled myself best I could, but was almost scared witless when another voice spoke up beside me, in a not all too muted whisper. “Who has what?”

It took me a second to recognize the voice – and the bundle of emotions attached to it that I hadn't noticed until now, thanks to the stupid flaming

love beacon blaring away above us – as a definitely changeling one, and yet a few more to place it as the scout I'd briefly spoken to a few times. “I thought we weren't supposed to talk?” I replied, still whispering.

The scout shook her head. Not that I could see her, but I could feel the air moving. That's how close she was to me, how *bloody cramped* the space we occupied was. “No, it should be fine now. The patrol is moving away. On hoof. In a minute or two they should be far enough away that we can sneak past them and get up in the air.”

I raised my eyebrows in surprise; I certainly couldn't tell anything like that from what I felt. Perhaps it was some specialty of the scout-caste. Elytra had mentioned something like that, at some point. I nodded slightly – or at least tried, what with the ground above me restraining my movement quite effectively – and was about to praise her for her sharp senses, before a small logical fallacy presented itself to me.

“Pegasi on foot?”

I felt a nod from the scout. “They probably found something that was too heavy for them to carry while flying. They're moving quite slowly, so they're likely quite encumbered.”

As I had been made quite aware of during my days with the changeling swarm, there were precisely three material objects present in the camp during the night. One was my walking staff, a two-meter length of sturdy birch that I'd stubbornly clung onto despite it being rather useless in the air – until Elytra showed me how to transmute it back and forth, at least – that I always kept close out of sheer habit. The second was my sleeping bag, which I was currently quite snugly wrapped up in.

I sincerely doubted that a troop of five pegasi couldn't manage to carry a stick into the air, and I was equally doubtful that they'd decided to bring with them a random boulder from the mountaintop. All other alternatives ruled out, I came to a most dreadful conclusion.

The ponies had found my backpack.

My backpack, which aside from a good number of material objects that I placed considerable value on, also contained the one thing that could safely get me back home to Earth. The Mercury Star.

And my bloody phone, too.

“Clarification, Elytra. We need to get a hold of that princess, and while we’re doing that, we also need to *get my bloody gear back*. Hopefully before the ponies realize there’s one of the strongest magical artifacts in the world inside it.”

Elytra’s answer was decidedly non-verbal, but her shame and despair was verbose enough for me. The scout’s, on the other hand, was not. “Phaetoles, you sand-raking idiot,” she hissed, planting a hoof square in the middle of her face.

Had I not been quite so chiseled into the mounds of the earth I would likely have mirrored her gesture best I could. As it was, I simply heaved a loud, irritated groan. Murphy, it seemed, had found my number again, and the line was about to run depressingly hot.

This was *not* a good morning.

Entry #14 - Heist

Heist

Entry #14

3rd of July, 20:58

Location: Outskirts of Hornwall, Duchy of Aurochs, Equestria

110m ASL, Cloudy and heavy fog

Temperature 7° C, Wind Speed 5 m/s S

For all their skills as the premier infiltrators of this universe, Changelings were rather unaccustomed to making proper use of naturally occurring phenomena when performing their work. Like the cover of a cold, foggy night, for example. Why bother sneaking in and risk getting caught, when you could just walk through the front door wearing the skin of some random townsbloke?

Groups of changeling agents had run small operations throughout Equestria this way for centuries, relying only on their shapeshifting magic and their obscurity to stay hidden from the Equestrian Royal Guard. Phaetoles, the scout who had stayed behind with us, had apparently been in charge of a small spy ring in a southern farm town – operating under the guise of a newspaper – before being called in to Chrysalis' Swarm for the invasion of Canterlot. And *she* had sure never used this kind of “stupid, primitive” plan.

She had reiterated this point several times to me during the day; that the plan involving a classic night-time sneak-in I had proposed was completely doomed to failure, and that I really ought to reconsider it and think of something better. Something like her sneaking in alone, for example.

The strangest thing was the extremely civil attitude she did all this with. She didn't get me riled up once, despite her insistent bickering. In fact, she

was rather talkative, and when she wasn't out making sure we didn't lose track of the small patrol of backpack-thieving ponies trudging through the hills in front of us – or worse, get spotted by them – I managed to get a good deal of information out of her. Foremost of it all was a good few talks about various parts of changeling culture, which was a subject I hadn't yet managed to get Elytra to open up too much about.

First was the part that she had given her name out so easily, introducing herself almost like a normal person would. I vividly remembered the fuss Elytra had made about giving up her name to me, and Chrysalis' reaction to that, so I had called her out on this rather immediately. Apparently she was something called an Anger – from what I could gather, basically the changeling variant of a civil servant – and as a part of the public establishment, her name was common knowledge the same way as Chrysalis' was. She was a part of the Ministry of Surveillance, one of the four big cogwheels in the changelings' administrative machine alongside the Ministries of Harvests, Population and Vassals. She didn't elaborate much, but she did give me a brief summary of how the changeling kingdom actually functions as a state.

“The moppies make sure there are enough of us to go around – ensuring reproduction rates are proper and that changelings are included into hives that need them. The Harvesters do what Harvesters do – take care of vassals and make sure they give enough energy for us all to keep going. The movvies keep the vassals in check, and make sure there's enough of *them* to go around – occasionally by raiding, but wild vassals tend to fight so much on their own accord that they mainly just need to go and fish up the losers from every battle, keeps them a lot more docile. Finally we mossies keep track of everything and everyone, and make sure everyone knows what they're supposed to so they don't screw things up – or break the law. Harvesters don't like us much for that last part,” she had finished before buzzing off to check on our prey once again.

I was quite thankful for the information given, of course, but my gratitude was not enough to give her back what she wanted. It was all and well that she was a changeling cop or whatever, but one thing was clear enough from her little resumé: she wasn't a very accomplished hunter.

So tonight, it was time to put the nickname I'd been given to test.

Fortunately enough, there wasn't a lot of conflict about my assumption of leadership. Both Elytra and Phaetoles acknowledged my right to decide in the matter, seeing as it was my possessions we were tracking; and I will admit I was not unhappy in the least about the way the Mercury Star was ascribed to me, as well. Phaetoles was mostly opposed to the method I proposed, and overcoming that was simply a matter of being insistent enough – that this was the way we were going to do things, and that was that – while Elytra had been strangely quiet ever since we first ran into this Princess Cadence that appeared to be leading the little convoy of ponies we'd been stuck tracking all day.

It was actually a pretty interesting encounter, incidents of theft aside. From the memories and archives shown to me by Elytra – and the Mercury Star, I suppose – the ponies led a society not all too different from its human counterpart in *structure*, but with culture gaps wider than the Ginungagap due to the prevalences of magic over technology and harmony over conflict. Being herbivores probably helped as well, now that I think about it. But aside from the remnants of the nobility of ancient Unicornia, the *real* Equestrian royalty were those possessed of not only *one* of the racial traits – wings for pegasi, horns for unicorns, and hardiness for earth ponies – but all of them. Alicorns, as they were called. Princess Celestia and Princess Luna, the seemingly immortal diarchs of the pony nation, were truly majestic in stature compared to their subjects, with appearances to match their surreally awesome powers.

Compared to them, Cadence appeared quite mundane. Sure, she was reasonably large for a mare, and stood taller than some of the Guard stallions accompanying her. Sure, her threefold gifts were obvious enough to any who took more than a passing glance at her. But other than that, she didn't seem very different from a regular pony at all. Granted, in present company her vibrant pink coat made her stand out from the uniformly white guardsponies like a flamingo around seagulls, but if there was any truth to the things I had seen in other memories she would fit right in with just about any other crowd.

The troublesome part in this case was that, despite having a changeling specialist on contemporary Equestria with me in Phaetoles, there still wasn't a whole lot known about her. By no means was she an immortal ancient like the other two Princesses; the first mention of her that the spy could recall was a brief notice in a magazine detailing her move to Canterlot "upon her ascension" at age twelve, dated eleven years ago. This term likely could mean either her being crowned, gaining her alicorn powers, or – assuming one followed the other, which wasn't very unlikely at all – both. By blood she was a commoner, and from what information Phaetoles had gathered for the invasion she had kept a very low profile in national politics throughout the years; until the hubbub about her marriage to the Captain of the Royal Guard, those who hadn't paid attention to her first wave of media coverage – the one following her ascension – had scarcely even known she existed at all.

Which presented us with a rather troublesome quandary: we did not know our enemy's weakness.

I watched the ponies descend the road into the fog-covered little town through a pair of stone binoculars. Changelings were familiar with looking glasses, and while I hadn't shown her the pair I'd brought with me – since they were stuck in the stolen backpack – Phaetoles was pretty talented at transmutation for a scout-caste, and fabricated the design from my description alone, though she had foregone the plastic for the locally available silicate substitute. Sure, they were a bit heavy, but I wasn't going to complain – the lenses in them were a huge improvement over what I was used to. As it was, I could clearly see Cadence speaking jovially to the helmetless guard beside her, despite being quite a fair distance away. Had there been unicorns with them before? The fog was starting to make things a bit hard to see; I'd soon have to start relying more on my radar-like changeling empathy sense to keep track of things, with visibility as bad as it was.

I frowned slightly, before turning the binoculars away from the princess, focusing on her escorts and the familiar load they were carrying. "So is there anything you can tell me about the rest of the enemy, then? What sort of force is the Guard, anyway?" I knew there wouldn't be much point in

asking the science-minded Elytra on this – I had tried her on several pony-related points before, with very limited success. As such, I had decided to test my luck and turn to the scout once more.

“What about them, Hunter? They’re a decent fighting force, I suppose,” she started off, with a hint of the twain-split voice that Chrysalis favored carrying her words. “They organize by rank and race, led by four Captains being the commanders of their respective forces. The Air Guard and the Land Guard’s captains are subordinated the captain of the Royal Guard itself, but from what I can tell the Night Guard is mostly independent. The Air Guard is made up by pegasi and is mainly used for scouting and transport, and the Land Guard is dominated by earth ponies and primarily tasked with police duties. The Royal Guard is mostly unicorns, though with some elites of other races as well, and they focus on the defense of the realm and its rulers; their captain is a unicorn, Shining Armor, Cadence’s husband. Oh, that’s the fellow without a helmet who joined them a few hours back. He specializes in protection spells. We should make our way into town before he decides to set up a barrier like in Canterlot.”

I immediately felt very stupid for ignoring the appearance of an additional signature on my magical radar, which I at the time simply had written off as a scout returning to the pack. I wasn’t entirely used to it yet, so seeing things properly came with some level of difficulty. Nevertheless, I lowered the binoculars and gave the scout a deadpan stare. “Her husband? The captain of the Guard is *here*? You don’t suppose you could’ve told me that sooner, like, when you saw him meet up with them or so?”

Phaetoles gave one of those weird-looking red-on-black blushes, clearly ashamed at her mistake. There wasn’t much else to do about it, though, and she probably knew it as well. Heaving a sigh, I put the binoculars around my neck; it was a pretty heavy weight, but weight was about to become mostly irrelevant in a moment, and throwing them away felt like a waste despite the ease with which they had been created. “Whatever. Just means we’d better make haste and get ourselves into the den of these little cloppety thieves, before they weld the door shut on us.”

I felt a pulse of amusement from Elytra, and almost had to fight back a smile of my own. After all, it was a pretty strange situation when all things

were said and done. Even after my experiences with the changelings, there was something special with chasing down a backpack stolen by talking horses – pegasi and unicorns, no less. All I needed now was a rainbow thrown in somewhere, and I'd be facing the real-life version of the stereotypical LSD trip.

There were no rainbows around, however – just a cold, heavy mist that would be digging through my jacket and seeping into my skin if I stood around here much longer, never mind whatever barrier the ponies put up. I shook my head and focused, letting the tugging smile be washed away by the one drug that was stronger than even endorphines: adrenaline. Slowly my mouth curved upward again, and I could feel a small measure of caution – or was it fear? – from both of my changeling companions as a predatory grin crawled onto my face.

The thrill of the hunt was beckoning, and its rapture burned inside me like a forge's fire, filling my magical reserves. A small part of my mind registered the slight feeling of breathlessness that indicated Elytra and Phaetoles taking their shares of the bounty as well, but I barely noticed it for the sheer amount of power coursing through me. Letting it loop around and multiply was a tempting prospect, but reminding myself of the Mercury Star swiftly replaced that looming temptation with a burning, hungry desire. Desire, and not a small measure of anger. The ponies had stolen from me – they dared take power that was *mine!* – and for that, they would be visited by the hunter's wrath.

I seized the growing flow of magic, and shaped the ever familiar wings in an almost instinctive motion; and in a theatrical spur of the moment, I lit a sparkling red flame to dance in my palm with a burst of rage. It lasted only for a second, but the sight of it boosted my confidence; it seemed I could do other things with magic than just fly, after all.

“Now we hunt,” I murmured, as much to the whispering wind as to my companions. Kicking off from the ground, I regulated my altitude more with magic than with my wings, to stay as quiet as possible. Behind me, green fire blazed briefly as Phaetoles morphed into the mirror image of a Royal Guard, before taking to the air on white pegasus wings.

This hunt was going to be a challenge, and I was damn well going to enjoy every last second of it.

-/-/-

Hornwall, as the reasonably legible sign proclaimed its name was, was a fair-sized village and not much more by my standards. True enough, using the standards of the 21st century might not have been the most fair to the clearly less-advanced Equestrians. However, Sweden has quite a large amount of villages of its own, and her cities are not the sprawling metropoli I've seen down on the continent – to say nothing of USA, or even China – so despite my being a westerner, I am first and foremost a northerner. I am well aware of what happens when a sparsely populated nation has to cover a vast expanse of land.

In this case, it was the type of village I've passed through multiple times in the northeast, close to the mountains and the Norwegian border. A thoroughfare passed through the middle from west to east, most likely connecting to other villages along the border; along its path were a few stores, an inn, and a bakery. The only real mystery was, to me, why they had chosen to settle in a giant freezing pit; Hornwall was surrounded by slopes on all sides, and the terrain was a far cry from the mountains, despite them being only a few miles away. Metric, mind you, none of that imperial yahoo.

This bowl-like hollow was thus filled with every last bit of cold air the area could muster, and tonight's heavy fog likely would've stopped far short of the village had it been situated on a reasonably flat piece of land. As it was, the closer we came to the bottom of the hole, the more we were swimming in a wispy mesh of clouds. Soon I could barely see Phaetoles to the side, and the quiet glide of her new pegasus wings – as opposed to the buzzing of changeling flight – made it hard to locate her by ear as well. I flared my emotions, and Elytra gave a startled cry in surprise; aside from that echoing through my mind, though, it had the desired effect. Phaetoles pulled up beside me and I gestured downward, the two of us gently touching down on the rocky ground beside the road.

“I want you to look around town and keep track of the guards' movements. If you can, try to get some information on where they're holding the backpack. I'm going to see if I can get anything out of that princess – she's easy enough to make out from the rest, even for me. If you find the pack, signal with a slow emotional pulse; if you're in danger, a fast pulse.” I flared my emotions just to make sure she'd understood, and she repeated the signal and nodded.

I turned to leave, but a feathered wing that wasn't my own poked me in the side, and I spun about; realizing only moments later that it was Phaetoles, not a bird or a pegasus who'd managed to spot me in the fog. The scout snickered a bit, before shaking her head. “You were right, Hunter. I was thinking they'd have a weather team on duty to clear this fog out, but I suppose a town like this is too small and remote to have one of its own.” She gave me a serious look, and raised a hoof. “Be careful. Cadence is most likely together with her husband, and he is a force to be reckoned with. Scholar, look out for him.” With that, she turned, and disappeared into the mist with a single wingbeat.

I stared for a moment at the wisps of cloudy white as they rushed to reclaim the empty space Phaetoles had left behind, before turning my attention inward. *Just the two of us again, then*, I sent to Elytra. I could feel her hesitation still, but she eventually materialized in her fairy-like form on my shoulder.

“I don't like this, Martin,” she said softly, eyes roaming about in the fog. “It feels like we're walking into a trap, and with this weather we won't be able to see anything at all.”

I could understand her sentiment. Certainly, in her seat I'd be liable to feel the same. Now, however, I was filled to the brim with power and my heartbeats were like drumbeats in my ears. There was no stopping the hunt, now. “Don't worry, Elytra. That's just the difference in our stress reactions showing. Your species doesn't spend much time tracking, trapping and killing others for food, to the best of my knowledge, so your adrenaline mainly calls on your instinct of flight, rather than fight. On the other hand, I am the apex predator.” I gave her a confident grin, and took a step forward. “There is no prey that humans cannot hunt.”

With my magic running, I could easier spot the way I had put the flight spell together. Thus it wasn't too difficult for me to figure out how to do what I wanted; namely strip off the wings and only leave the antigravity part. Flying with them was easy enough, but I hadn't quite confidence in my ability to dodge and duck around on the ground with them just yet. In this case it was better to simply enhance my human abilities with the gravity-defying speed and agility of that spell's other half.

The wings disappearing brought a small feeling of loss, and Elytra gave me a curious look; however, I still felt light as a feather, and confirmed it with a small hop that took us a few meters up in the air, and left us hanging for several seconds before we touched down again. Satisfied, I crouched down for a bit, before giving a hefty push with my legs, propelling us forward in a mad dash.

The mist swirled around me like a whirlwind of smoke, and I shot through almost halfway through the town on the arrow-straight thoroughfare before I could even react. I lessened the antigravity as much as I dared, and slowly started to fall down enough that I could manage to grab hold of the signpost of a store. The wooden structure creaked badly as I swung back and dropped down to the ground; I ground my teeth at the noise, but a moment of increased gravity hastened my fall significantly. Making sure to power the spell back up again to avoid breaking my legs as I touched the ground, I quickly dodged into the narrow alley between the store – possibly a bar of some kind, judging by the flagon-shaped design of the sign – and its neighboring building.

Sure enough, it didn't take many seconds before one of the white-coated guards opened the door to the establishment, trying to shake the fog away from his eyes as he peered into the night. "Who's there? Hello?" The stallion took a few steps out toward the street, flexing his wings tentatively. "Show yourself!"

I was extremely grateful for the fog, further obscuring me in the darkness; as it was, I could barely make out his features by eye, but my magical radar let me largely fill out the blanks. Considering the light shining from the door, he shouldn't even have had much in terms of night vision yet, and I was fairly certain the empathy sense was a changeling-only thing. Still, I

couldn't just cower here all night, and if I let him report to someone else, they'd be more alert the next time something happened. I decided it would be rather advantageous to have him...disappear.

I increased the spell's power enough that I could simply walk up the wall of the second house, and slowly edged myself into position. I heard the guard mutter, "Damn rascals," maybe as if he thought it was the work of mischievous locals making noise in the night; perhaps I should have let him retreat safely at that point, but the vision in my mind was simply too tempting to let the opportunity pass. I pushed off with my legs, and dive-bombed the unsuspecting pegasus from the side. I must've knocked the air out of him quite well, and for my purposes that was very much fine.

Still, I didn't want to give him time to scream; as soon as my feet found the ground, I dug my fingers into his fur-coated side, and enveloped him in my antigravity spell. Focusing briefly, I pushed almost all the power I had used on myself onto him. In an effortless yet mighty heave, I hoisted him onto my shoulder, and *pushed*. In a decent imitation of my own first takeoff, the pegasus vanished into the fog above at a frightening speed. With my radar, I could "see" him tumble and turn as he struggled hopelessly to regain control, beating with wings that took no air because of the bubble of distorted gravity around him. I held on to the spell until I was certain he'd reached a high enough altitude to ensure he'd be out of the game for a while, before letting go and dodging back into the alley.

At some point Elytra had disappeared from her perch on my shoulder; radar aside, I felt the same strange tugging I had during my little predawn stroll, indicating we were far enough apart for it to be a strain on "the bonds between our soul and the separate bodies anchoring them", as she had explained it when I'd asked her earlier during the day. With my adrenaline starting to ebb away a bit, she sensed the confrontation was past, and sent a few choice words to me. *I've found the princess.*

I'm sure I could've found her myself if Elytra hadn't, but it did save me the time looking for things in the dark; as handy as it was, the radar didn't help much with seeing inanimate objects. It would hardly do if I just blindly walked in the direction the radar told me Cadence was, and marched right into her window. Following Elytra's little trail of images, I navigated the

narrow alleys behind the bar; before long I found her hovering just outside the lamplight of a two-story building that looked a few degrees classier than the rest I'd seen throughout the town.

She gave me a nod as I approached, but wisely kept our conversation mental. *It's only the two of them – Cadence and Armor – inside, but they're both awake. I'm unsure of how strong their magic is, but you shouldn't underestimate it. They did repel the entire swarm on their own. Keep that in mind before you try to fight them.*

I nodded back at her, and smiled briefly. *Don't worry. I fully intend to use every last dirty trick in my book, before fighting either of them. Watch the entrance for me.* She nodded again, and I slid the door open – thankfully the hinges were well-oiled, so there wasn't any noise there – and snuck in on light feet before nudging it shut behind me.

My eyes took a few moments to adjust to the light, and I didn't want to be off balance for any potential confrontation. From where I stood I could hear the two occupants of the room talking in a more or less serious tone; for which I was thankful, being that they were husband and wife. I'm not entirely sure what I'd have done if I had walked in on two alien horses having sex, but I'm fairly certain it wouldn't have helped further my interests a whole lot. Then again, that sort of thing would quite definitely have given a response on my radar, what with the immense outburst of love energy generated. Sure, it was a rather mundane ability on its own, but the power to avoid awkward situations like that was definitely something I'd be cherishing once I returned to the human world.

Assuming I could keep it, that was.

I contemplated for a second to stay a while and listen, and see if I could gather anything from the pair's conversation. It didn't take me long to decide against it, though – it was hard to hear through the thick walls anyway, and I'd be wasting valuable time that Phaetoles was trying to use to find my stuff. My path decided, I powered up my spell enough that I could just float through the air on a single hop, reaching the door to their room without a sound. Preparing my magic, I drew a quiet breath, and kicked in the door.

Luck was, for once, on my side. Cadence was splayed out on the enormous bed, wrapped up in her bedsheets and staring at me with an absolutely dumbfounded look; I assume her lack of military training and combat experience made her too shocked and surprised to react. More importantly however, Shining Armor had his back turned to me, and was in the middle of removing his gilt-laden uniform; from the looks of it he was using his magic for it, too, assuming that a shining horn meant the same for unicorns as it did for changelings.

I didn't have all that much time, though, and I wasn't exactly much of a mage yet in terms of skill. Using physical means to confront these two was definitely not a prospect I was all too keen on, either. Thus, I resorted to the one tool I'd managed to gain some degree of mastery over so far: gravity.

In a strange *pulling* motion, I intensified the gravity around Shining Armor many times over; the floor groaned under his new massive weight, and the half-dressed unicorn let out a strangled sound as his legs let out and he collapsed onto the ground. I raised a hand before Cadence could get as much as a word out, and gave her the fiercest stare I could manage. "No sudden moves, screaming or magic, or the unicorn dies." The fact that I managed to deliver a line so cliché without so much as missing a beat was I think, a wonder in and of itself.

Sadly, it appeared Equestrian royalty weren't familiar with hollywood one-liners the way humans generally are. Seeing her husband with a magical noose around his neck was quite apparently too much for her, and tears welled up in her vibrant eyes as she stammered incoherently, only just managing to keep herself from crying out and earning Shining Armor an early grave.

This was honestly a bit too much for me to handle – I suppose I should've thought of the whole *herbivore civilization* thing a bit before issuing death threats willy-nilly – and I let out a loud groan. "Oh for fuck's sake, woman. Do you not know what the word *hostage* means, or what?" She blinked several times, apparently trying to get the tears out of her eyes without so much as even moving her hooves an inch, before nodding weakly. I rolled my eyes, and eased up the spell holding Shining just a bit. "Look, if I actually wanted to kill Shinebutt here I would have done so the moment I

came into this room, or just brought the house down upon you both. That is not the case, but I'm going to spell it out for you in case you're too much in shock to grasp basic logic. I'm holding this fellow down to make sure he doesn't try anything funny, and threatening him in order to make sure *you* don't try anything funny. The reason I'm doing this instead of just smiting you both is because *you*, princess, have taken something that is *mine*, and I need to know where it is. So start talking!"

Criminal masterminds of the world, you have my condolences. It must be a terribly frustrating line of work sometimes.

Cadence was clearly not entirely sure about the situation yet, as her first words were stammering and hesitant, with her directing worried looks toward her husband every other second. "What... I, I don't...what are you talking about? Taken? Do you mean the saddlebag we found?"

Figures they wouldn't know a backpack when they saw one, either. Well, at least the word 'bag' was in there somewhere, so at least I knew what she was talking about. "Yes, that. You stole it from my hoard, and I am going to take it back. Where is it?"

She frowned a bit, and shook her head. "It should be with the guardsponies – they were at, um, they, they were–" I cut her off, since from the way she hesitated and shifted her eyes she was clearly trying to make something up to try and fool me; I scarcely needed the lie detector inside my head to see through a tell that obvious. I had very little desire to be forced to actually kill the unicorn or lose the fear I had instilled in her by allowing her to think me duped, so I simply cut that variable from the equation entirely. "At the bar. I am aware." Her eyes widened in surprise, and I sighed, annoyed. Of course I had bloody walked right past them, too.

But at least I had gained one important piece of information: princess Cadence was a terrible, terrible liar. Which made the next piece of this interrogation more possible to succeed – the reason I had proposed this idea at all in the first place, rather than just a simple "rush in, grab the bag and leg it" variant. "Stand up. Now." The mark on her side was hidden under the covers, and I wanted to get a good look at it to make sure my theory was correct.

Fear spiked in the princess' mind, obviously afraid I was going to, oh, I don't know, mutilate her or something. I gave her an exasperated look, and she finally started unshuffling herself from the covers. I sensed wariness from Shining as well, and made sure to give him a hard look; it was hard for him to show much, I suppose, but the fuming, barely restrained anger I could feel burning in his mind was quite enough. He wouldn't try anything stupid – for now.

Fear and hesitation burned bright in Cadence's mind as she stood up – somewhat swayingly, but having wings and being a quadruped probably helped in resisting the bed's effort to topple her over – but she gave me her best defiant look nonetheless. Elytra's advice echoed in my mind; this *was* a mare who had managed to serve an astounding defeat to Chrysalis, after all. Still, I didn't have much time for that at the moment, so I simply circled around the bed and crouched down to inspect the image – images, even, since there was one on each side – of the Venus Star painted on her side.

Slowly, her fear turned to confusion, and when I put my hand on the mark to try and puzzle out how it had gotten there – from what I could tell it seemed almost like a part of her natural coloring – embarrassment flared like a beacon inside her. So much for avoiding awkward situations, I guess, but there was no time for small things. “This mark,” I began, trying to completely ignore the massive blush sprouting on Cadence's already bright pink face, and the ever-growing humiliation and rage seething from the magically restrained unicorn on the floor. “Where did you get it? How? When? Do you understand what this image means?” I traced the edge of the mark once, and drew my hand back. There wasn't much point to embarrassing her any further just for the sake of it, after all.

Confusion was back in force in the pink alicorn's mind, and this time it showed clearly on her face as well – accompanied by a fair bit of irritation. “What are you talking about? I got my cutie mark when I was a filly, just like everyone else does, and it shows what my special talent is, just like everyone else's cutie marks do! Sure, you don't normally grow a horn when it appears, and I guess *love* as a special talent is a bit cheesy, but what sort of question is that supposed to be?”

Cutie marks. For real, fucking *cutie* marks. And she thought she had a right to call *anything* cheesy!

Two things were clear enough, however. For one, Cadence knew nothing of the Venus Star; she thought the Crystal Heart on her flank was just another heart symbol, and never mind that hers was bright blue rather than the usual red. I suppose there was the possibility of that being another weird aside of pony culture – or perhaps ponies actually *had* blue blood or something – but my instincts told me that wasn't the case. Which in turn meant that the ponies knew just as little about the Elements of Magic as the changelings did, or possibly even less.

The second was just how much I'd been missing, relying on my knowledge of the changelings to decipher pony culture. Now that I thought about it, I had seen these kinds of marks on most ponies I'd seen in the memories Elytra had shown me. Shining had some sort of shield-like thing on his flank, as well, which matched what Phaetoles had told me about his specializing in protection spells. The guards' marks were hidden by their armor, of course; but Celestia had her suns, Luna had her moons, and Starswirl had...

Starswirl hadn't had any mark. Come to think of it, neither had King Platinum, Mercuria or any of the others I'd seen in those ancient memories. Something was wrong here, and once again I was missing it entirely.

Before I could take that train of thought any further, though, I felt a disturbance on my radar; focusing briefly, I filtered out a vibrating pulse of fear coming from the direction of the bar. Apparently so did Elytra, judging by the panicked jumble of words she sent me; and judging by the fear from Phaetoles' signal, she needed my help post haste. I muttered a curse before backing out of the room, staring acidly at the two ponies before spinning about and running out the front door.

Elytra took up her perch even as I was flying down the stairs to the wooden building, and I reluctantly released the gravity well holding Shining Armor before shooting into the sky with a powerful jump. The signal was gone already, but it was fairly obvious that the scout had fallen afoul of the

guards at the bar; and finding that building, with the small swarm of soldiers milling about inside, was simple enough with just the radar.

I touched down on the dirt road with another expertly gauged gravity shift, and looked around for the entrance in the swirling fog. The next moment, however, I felt and heard someone touch down behind me, and that sound was followed by a heavy thud. “Hunter,” a bright male voice called, and the next second a pegasus guard appeared from the covers of the mist.

It took me a moment to realize that this was Phaetoles, who apparently had taken the appearance of one of the other guards – all stallions – to blend in, and from my experience with Freja-Chrysalis I knew changelings were more than capable of completely changing their voices as well. More importantly, however, she was lugging my backpack with one of her wings; a more than welcome sight, as judging by the frenetic activity inside the bar we were about to run very much out of time. “Good timing, Phaetoles,” I said while bending down to hoist the backpack up. “Come on, let's go. Don't fall behind.”

I fastened the straps as quickly as I could, but I hadn't managed to get my wings out when the door slammed open behind me and a mass of angry voices streamed out. Grabbing hold of Phaetoles and enveloping her in a high-powered antigravity field, I launched us off the ground with a massive push of my legs, and we shot into the obscuring sky as one.

I could sense panic inside her for a moment, but it quickly subsided when I released the magic around her and she regained control of her own flight. A welcome tingle spread through my body as I shifted my spell, and my wings finally returned. I smiled briefly, before scanning my surroundings with the radar to see if anyone was pursuing us; nobody was, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I allowed myself to relax a bit again.

It took us several seconds before we finally came out of the massive cloud of fog covering the little village. While waiting for Phaetoles I oriented myself with the help of the mountains to the north, and set myself on a southward course; a short while later the temporary white pegasus exited the fog as well, and made a quick roundabout before falling in by my side. A brief flash of green light lit me up as Elytra, who had dematerialized

during the launch, once again returned to her perch on my shoulder. Together our mismatched little trio speared through the night at a fearsome speed, and I felt a small hope – whether it was mine or Elytra's, I truly cannot say – that we might be able to catch up to Chrysalis again before too long.

Barring any more freak incidents, that actually wasn't too much of a long shot at the speed we were making; and surely even Murphy must've been tired of me after hanging around me for this long. Not even the omnipresent god of misfortune can stand being alone with a cynical viking too much, after all – or at least, that was what I very sincerely hoped as we began our night flight. Hell knows, the entire journey had made me very cross with old miser myself; and being rid of him once and for all was one of the most tantalizing prospects I could imagine at the time.

Thinking back on my confrontation with Cadence, however, the unthreatened top entry of that list reminded me of its presence. From what she had said, she had turned into an alicorn when she gained the mark of the Venus Star; and from what I knew of that royal race of ponies, one thing stood out far from the others.

Immortality beckoned; and my thoughts circled between its irresistible light and the Mercury Star in my backpack, while a pale silvery moon rose over the starry Equestrian sky.

Entry #15 - The Spanish Inquisition

The Spanish Inquisition

Entry #15

4th of July, 00:29

Location: Airspace north of Neighagra Falls, Duchy of Aurochs, Equestria

2900m ASL, Mostly cloudy

Temperature -3° C, Wind Speed 14 m/s S

Finally, the air was actually getting cold.

I'd been pushing us upward for a good hour of our flight since we escaped Hornwall, in order to shake prospective pursuers and prevent any spotters on the ground from discovering us. Phaetoles had warned me for patrols of pegasi in the vicinity, so I'd thought it best to not take any chances, and decided to gain some altitude to be safe. As we rose upward, though, I felt a nagging need, a desire; and with winter being many long months away yet, it didn't take me long to realize just what my craving was for.

As my gravity magic had grown in sophistication, I'd developed a sense of position relative to the gravitational field that was the planet's own. Now, after the experiments of yesterday and the following "field test" in the village, I could with pretty decent certainty tell how far from the ground I was. I suspected I might be able to develop a more proper coordinate tracking spell with some practice, but right now there were other things to do.

Either way, the winds started biting fairly hard in my back as I crossed 2000 meters, but it took almost another thousand until I could feel the freezing chill of a proper sub-zero breeze. Having Elytra with me was, all things

considered, a bit like being jacked into a giant sensor suite – a perk of the Scholar caste, as I understood it – and now I could take full advantage of it.

I laughed as I plowed face-first into a cloud, its wispy fog enveloping me as I tore through its inside like a missile. Much due to my own exhilaration, it took me a few seconds to sense the bundle of emotions beneath me.

Phaetoles wanted my attention, apparently.

I dove down and exited the high-flying cloud, and took position at her side. She was still in the pegasus shape she'd borrowed in town; I was suspecting she favored it because of the higher speed she could make with it, but it was clear she was now starting to worry. Changeling senses really *did* make life simpler, sometimes.

“Hunter! We need to decrease our altitude! This form can't sustain flight in this cold weather for too long!” The form's male voice still threw me a bit off guard, but it was just one of those things you had to get used to around changelings. I had seen Chrysalis doing a perfect imitation of my sister, after all – this wasn't really worse in comparison, just a bit weirder.

And speaking of changeling things, I was going to have no part of getting down. “So turn back to your usual form, then! This is just a spring breeze for a changeling's shell – we must've gotten far enough to rule out anyone finding us up here, right? We don't need to go all that fast anymore!”

She looked like she was considering the proposal for a few seconds, before giving an energetic shake of her head. “I wouldn't be so sure about that! This area has a pretty large population of pegasi! Besides, we need to make our way back to Her Majesty as fast as possible!”

I rolled my eyes – not that she'd see it, but anyway – and shot upward into the clouds around me, throwing a gravity field about so the wisps formed a tornado-like spiral around me. “You're not being any fun at all, Phaetoles! Queen Cheezelegs can wait a few hours, and if I have to carry you all the way to the border because you freeze up it's gonna take even longer to get there anyway!” To my great delight, a patch of snowy weather swept across us; power blazed within me as I dove this way and that in the ocean of nightly blue. I couldn't help but laugh a bit – and letting that out felt like

dropping half the weight off my shoulders. It had been far too long since I'd actually been able to laugh at something.

Elytra's emotions mirrored my own; if only because the small loop of power entranced her as much as it did me. Unexpectedly, though, Phaetoles didn't seem affected by the surge; she'd been well close enough to draw some of it in, but her face – and emotions – were as serious and troubled as before. And somewhere, far down, I thought I could sense... something darker. Contempt? Fear? Even now I'm not totally sure what it was, but to my changeling sense it was like eating a steak seasoned with tar.

It was her words that confused me the most, however. “What are you, a Windigo?” It felt so strange not to understand what she was talking about; with Elytra in my head I'd been able to get every single reference the swarm had thrown at me so far, but now my other half was just as confounded as I was.

It didn't last more than a second, though, before she flew up close and fell in beside me again. “But...well, I guess you're right. More than right, in fact – it's been a long day, now that I think about it! And I do suppose Her Majesty can allow us a few hours of leeway, at that! We should make camp and rest, Hunter! Before we *both* fall over and need to be carried, and crash because we don't have anypony to do it for us!”

It was a quite true statement in theory, and I suspected that despite how strong I felt at the moment, it would be a different story in an hour or two. Different enough, maybe, that I wouldn't be able to make the climb down from 3k high to ground level safely. Magical power does strange things to a mind that's not used to handling it, and more so if it's overly abundant. I did not want to experience my first magical hangover – that was the image I'd got from Elytra about it – almost halfway up to the cruise altitude of a Boeing. So I reveled in the snow for a few more moments, before nodding to the scout and winging down on a downward course.

Now that we weren't facing the blue-lit sky anymore it was a bit difficult to get any bearings; and this time I had no swarm of a hundred scouts to help look for a place to land in the middle of the night, as I'd grown used to while in Chrysalis' company. It was just me and Phaetoles, with Elytra as a

third set of eyes. Or, it would have been, if she hadn't been hell-bent on locking herself up in her part of our head and throwing thoughts around like the shots of a railgun. And the reason for it was surprisingly trivial – she was trying to figure out what a “windigo” was.

The roles of Scholar and Hunter could not have been much clearer than they were at that moment, I believe.

We spent a good half-hour trying to find someplace in the ever-darkening night to make camp, but without luck; even though we needed considerably less space than the swarm of a hundred I was used to, we were still stuck in rocky, miserable mountain lands. Adding to our troubles, the clouds had gone thick during our trip down. Without the ambient light of a nearby city that I was so used to – or the Midnight Sun to take its place – the hostile landscape was almost oppressively dark. Not that I had much of a problem with it, but I could sense Phaetoles' worry the instant we lost the last bit of moonlight from above.

I found it curious. Sure, she had complained about using the fog, but that was a completely different thing. Wasn't it? Besides, changelings lived in the deep of the jungle – they could hardly be unused to dark nights, could they? Though she had mentioned she'd spent a lot of time in pony lands, on missions – perhaps she'd grown used to that, somehow.

My pondering was cut short as a shout in the distance – along with a small burst in the package of emotions that was hers – signaled that Phaetoles had found a good campsite. I homed in on her signal on my ever useful radar and found her immediately, on her haunches in a small rocky hollow in a valley; oddly enough she seemed a bit surprised about something as I arrived.

I took a few minutes to check through my things, to ensure that the ponies hadn't actually taken anything from my backpack – thankfully they hadn't, and everything was intact and in their proper spots – before getting my sleep gear out and set up. I offered to take the first watch, but Phaetoles – who was still in the pony form from before – insisted on taking it herself. I thought it a bit suspicious, since she'd been the one to call for our need to rest in the first place; but I did need sleep, and I wasn't about to argue about

getting my share of it first. Without much further pandering about things, I rolled myself into the sleeping bag, and lay my head to rest on my makeshift pillow.

Or well, tried, to, at least. Tonight, however, it seemed all there was inside the little nylon wrapping was the Mercury Star. Which, as you might imagine, did not make for a very good place to rest my head.

Assuming, that was, that it was rest of body and mind one wished to achieve, of course.

The hard sphere connected with my head, and I saw stars. Not in the figurative sense; actual stars, shimmering in the distant sky like lone snowflakes in moonlight. The poetic view didn't do much to shake my firm realization that I was seeing something absolutely impossible, however. Unfamiliar constellations aside, I knew for a fact that only seconds ago, the sky had been very much covered in a thick sheet of clouds that refused to let as much as a single glint of the night sky's lights through.

Unless, of course, they had randomly teleported.

Teleporting clouds, you lot. If you've been paying attention, and have at least some ability to remember things you've been told, you should recognize this part just as well as I did in that very moment.

But aside from the realization – well, confirmation of what I'd already suspected, but still – that the Mercury Star had been involved in jaunting me over the first time around, there was also something *else* swimming around in my head. It took a few moments for me to place the familiar feeling: not pain from hitting my head, but *memories*, entering my brain.

Like you could expect, it was all a garbled mess to me in that moment. Much like any modern computer, a human mind has a high yet limited maximum indexing speed when it comes to information – if you plug a flashdrive into a USB port and tell your system to check it, it's going to take a while.

However, compared to the example of a computer, I had an advantage this time. For one thing, I was carrying around a second system inside my head to help me index any information it might come across, and at that moment it was in the process of searching through all available data for something very, very specific indeed. And much like you still can see the first level of that flashdrive by just clicking on it, there was one bit of knowledge that came across with brilliant clarity. One word, and the meaning carrying it – with Elytra's voice making itself heard in my head.

Windigo. Ancient myths in pony and changeling civilization alike, but with vastly different interpretations. Their origins can be traced to the Mercury Lighthouse incident, which nearly toppled early pony society. The word refers to the perpetrators of the incident, though changeling and pony lore go widely aside on their nature.

According to changeling lore, Windigos are spirits of madness. It is said that a changeling that loses control of her rage during battle will turn into a frightening ghost of war, striking down friend and foe alike before consuming her own flesh in a massive explosion. Windigos are said to be the broken souls left behind, haunting anyone that falls afoul of their presence to a fate of insanity and untimely death.

Pony lore, however, dictates that Windigos are spirits of rage and winter. Soaring in the wind and clouds, they would bring snow and ice with their dancing hoofsteps, and bring winter's cold fury down on anypony brave enough to stand against them.

There was a moment of silence, before Elytra spoke up again; this time with a decidedly anxious tone. *Bring snow with their dancing hoofsteps, Martin...* It was a feeling I very much shared, and it bounded across our minds like a thousand racing deer on a field. Before long, though, the deer were running headfirst off the field, doing their damn best to dodge the hail of mental puzzle pieces finally falling into place. A wrong smile there, a strange grimace there, a genuinely strange reaction where I'd been expected something quite different. And to top it off – when had I ever heard anyone refer to Chrysalis as “her Majesty”? Never, that's when. With that final piece of the riddle solved, the lock to the Pandora's Box I'd been tattering around all night finally opened, and its contents rushed at me mercilessly.

We'd been fooled. Thoroughly scammed through and through, and we'd been just a single step away from giving every single crown in the bank to a silver-tongued Nigerian. If not for the Mercury Star's timely intervention – something I'd have to give a good look later, when I wasn't in immediate danger – we'd have been utterly, hopelessly defeated.

But then again, who could have blamed us? It wasn't something as an e-mail from a suspicious address with contents sounding much too good to be true, or something as genuinely persuasive as a relative who's "stuck in London without a plane ticket or money and needs some help to get home".

It wasn't as though the thought hadn't entered my mind, either – it was just that no matter how I looked at it, just sounded totally, completely ridiculous. Surely, my suspicions were baseless and ungrounded. They had to be, because the only other alternative was something so ludicrous that even I, in my most paranoid moments, would've had trouble thinking it up.

I mean, what kind of crazy idiot impersonates a shapeshifter?

I swung my eyes about, swiftly locating "Phaetoles" with the help of my radar. She – no, *he* – wasn't paying any attention to the wild mood swings I and Elytra were sharing, like a changeling would have; instead, he was completely occupied with figuring out where the clouds had disappeared to. Which was quite understandable, now that my thoughts had freed themselves from the little box they'd previously been stuck in; pegasi had powers over the weather, after all. Pegasi, not changelings.

A pegasus. A Royal Guard. An *enemy*. And he thought he could get away with playing Loki's games with Martin Winter, did he?

Elytra was fuming in equal parts embarrassment and fear; I was filled to the brim with rage at this humiliation. Fortunately, I've always been a good actor; my voice and expression were quite calm as I called the impostor over, his hooves tapping against the rocky surface of the hollow as he closed on me. For a moment I was in a quandary: how should I call him on his bluff? One look skyward was all it took to answer that, however. Pegasi were the weather monkeys of this world, after all.

I got up from my sleeping bag, trying to look a bit disheveled. “What happened to the sky? Where did all the clouds go? What's going on here?” Granted, I'm not the best in the world at sounding distressed – besides, living with changelings for any extended period of time makes you start relying on their empathic senses for a good amount of things, I tell you – but thankfully the pony I was speaking to supplied a good deal of distress of his own.

“I don't know either! They just straight up and vanished! If we had some actual pegasi here I guess we could learn more, but-” I cut him off – being served up like that was something I couldn't resist in this situation.

“Oh, but we do, don't we? One actual pegasus, in place of the fake one I was expecting.” With every word out of my mouth, the building mountain of rage inside my mind grew a few sizes larger. Fool me once? Yeah, *no*.

The pegasus opened his mouth briefly to respond, before realizing what I'd actually said; the next moment, a cocky smile sprouted on his face, gloating in full effect. “Gig's up, huh? Didn't expect it this soon, though. I'm impressed, chum.”

I fumed. My building rage towered higher than Olympus Mons, but somewhere in that infuriating tone of his – and inside his mind – laid an immense feeling of *safety* despite the obvious risk of the situation. At least, I assumed it was obvious; the sheer fact that he was here in the first place indicated that the ponies had noticed my magic before it was too late, somehow. That feeling was the only thing that made me hold the rage back instead of unleashing it in a massive torrent of magical fire at the unshielded pegasus. Hell knows I was way too unfocused for gravity at that moment.

Not that he needed to know about that, though. “Yeah, impressed indeed, like the coroner's gonna be when he sees your corpse squashed against the ground like a bulldozer ran over it. While on fire. Now, got any last words before I give you to the ravens?” Sparks flew from my hands – I simply couldn't hold it all in like this, it was as easy as that – and I felt a stirring heat glaze across my eyes. Looks *could* kill, and I was seconds from burning the feathered equine to a crisp with my best imitation of a basilisk.

Except...

The pegasus kept smiling, but there was a good deal of tension in his smile; his feeling of safety was mostly gone, replaced by fervent urgency and stress. Not much fear, true, but at least now he was *aware* of the mortal danger he was in. “Ohoho, now, now. Let's not get all too hasty, eh? From how angry you've become, it's gotta mean you've put quite some stake in the one I'm replacing. Ain't that right, no? In which case I'd really not advise you to make this turn ugly, or you won't have anything but a moldy bug-corpse to present to Her Majesty. Assuming you make it out of Equestria in the first place, that is.”

It was surprising in many ways – surprising enough that I forgot my seething rage for a moment. I'm not sure what surprised me more – that he thought I cared enough about Phaetoles to stay my hand from killing him, or that I actually did feel rather hesitant about sending her to her death. I've never been much for developing attachments to anything but family, to be honest, but at the same time, I'm wasn't quite heartless enough to simply not care about people who worked with me. No, it was more than that; she was an ally. A comrade, even.

True, she wouldn't have worked very well as a hostage during any extended period of time. But the few seconds the impostor got were quite enough for him. “That's better. You see, Carte Blanche means I always get away scot-free, you kn-” He didn't get any further than that with his taunt before he was forced to dodge a spear of green magic; I had barely noticed Elytra exiting my body, but now she was in her old form, baring her fangs and preparing yet another spell. I could feel my own rage ringing through to her, but from the way she was reacting it was obvious enough she wasn't nearly as used to it.

A mocking laughter barked in the night for a few seconds as the Pegasus made his escape into the sky. Elytra threw one more beam at him, before turning around to face me with an accusing stare. “Martin! What are you doing!? We have to chase him and get Phaetoles back! Don't just stand there!”

But as much as my fury burned, I couldn't give in to its call. It was a realization that I'd made earlier, when I'd left the princess behind in town, but hadn't fully taken to heart until now: I had drawn attention. Before long the eyes of the pony nation would be on me, and if I couldn't manage to finish my business before that happened...

There would be consequences. I did not want to risk losing my trip home again, but *even less* did I want to get bloody chained up by a bunch of horses. Both of those dangers were very much real as long as I remained in Equestrian territory, and all things considered it was well past time for me to be gone. For us both to be gone – I had no wish for Elytra to share any of those fates either.

A funny thought, that, but quite logical when you think about it. As far as intimacy goes, sharing your soul with someone is probably about as strong a bond as you can get. Blood may be thicker than water, but body and soul is damn well thicker than them both put together.

Blood mixed with water just makes for a bad drink, after all.

I quenched my fires, and put a hand on Elytra's head. "Elytra. We have to go. I don't want to leave Phaetoles behind either, but we have bigger problems than that. What's it worth if we stay behind again, and we *all* get caught? What about the Mercury Star? We have to get out of here. Now."

Well, *now* was perhaps a bit of a rough estimate, seeing as I did have to pack my things as well; but with Elytra's help it only took half a minute or so. Every second weighed on my mind, however, and the moment I was ready I pumped my wings out and filled them with every bit of power I could muster. We tore through the night like a flock of ravens gone mad, swiftly leaving the rocky barrens of the borderlands behind for the forested, watery Equestrian northeast. Before long, though, I could feel my focus falter, and falter badly; we made land in a small grove, and the moment I retracted my wings and let my magic go my consciousness fled me.

And despite the situation I was in, all I could think of as I was collapsing was that my clothes were going to get dirty for no good reason...

...and that nobody, *nobody* expects the Spanish Inquisition; least of all, the Spanish Inquisition themselves.

Entry #16 - A Grand Strategy

A Grand Strategy

Entry #16

4th of July, 10:01

Location: Airspace, border between duchies Aurochs and Cante-Wirl

750m ASL, clear skies

Temperature 12° C, Wind Speed 5 m/s S

“This is it, Martin.”

Elytra's sudden words made me slow down a bit, for the first time since our hasty takeoff that morning once I regained consciousness. I'd been out cold – I resent calling that manner of rest *sleep* – for too many hours for me to like, and urged Elytra to swiftly continue with our flight to ensure we evaded any possible pursuers from the north.

Today she was flying on her old wings, staying close as to avoid pulling on the invisible tether that bound our souls together; either way, though, it was good to have a second set of eyes with me. My radar wasn't all too effective over distances like you'd have in any sort of aerial contact situation, and would likely just keep me distracted if I tried to extend its radius too much anyway. So we'd spent the whole morning flying in a close formation, with Elytra optimizing her flying power best she could with spells of various sorts. She had blatantly refused to take on a pegasus shape, without me even asking – and after what happened last night, I don't blame her in the least.

Odd as it was; while the holed, chitinous changelings and their abilities were certainly more alien to my human standards, they carried with them heaps of positive connotations in the back of my head. Trustworthy. Loyal. Diligent. Helpful. A pegasus or unicorn was – color aside – not too visually

different from any other earth animal, but to me they felt far more alien than anything else.

Well, aside from humans themselves, perhaps. I will confess, I've never really managed to figure out this mess of a species we are, even now; certainly not then, what with my very humanity being on the slippery slope of assimilation and whatnot. But that is a different story altogether.

“This is what, exactly?” I called back. We were close enough and the tailwind was weak enough that we didn't need to be all that loud to hear each other, and never mind the mind-sharing making conversation redundant to some point in the first place. Still, old habits die hard, as they say; and while not perhaps old *per se*, my 'flight voice' was one of the first things I'd picked up while traveling with the Swarm. Besides, there was some charm in just hearing another person's words in your ears, rather than inside your head. Once that strange, insectile vibrato was gone, Elytra actually had a pretty nice voice.

She gave me a serious look, and then gestured toward a towering, lonely mountain in the distant southwest before pointing at a small line of cleared land in the middle of the forest ahead of us that I hadn't spotted. “This railway runs along the border of Canterlot province. Once we cross it, we're in the heartlands of Equestrian territory. I'm...” Her resolve faltered for a moment, and pulse of fear echoed across from her mind to mine. “I'm scared, Martin. Last time – during the invasion – when we crossed this border from the south, I had scores and scores of my brothers and sisters with me. We were *still* nervous about it, even then. Now they'll doubtlessly have increased patrols and trained their guards against changeling tactics, and it's just the two of us. It's...”

A memory shone bright in her mind, but I didn't bother looking; I knew perfectly well what it was. Celestia, the sovereign of the pony kingdom; locked in a cataclysmic magic duel with Chrysalis, who only managed to come out on top thanks to her immense amounts of stored magic. We had neither Chrysalis nor her massive magic stores this time around; and while Elytra and I certainly were no pushovers magic-wise, assuming we'd be anywhere near able to outperform an actual alchemist on her own home turf would be blatant stupidity.

Well, perhaps not that bad. I've nurtured a theory for some time that it was in fact Chrysalis' usage of the old magic, rather than the harmony-based version ponies use nowadays, that had let her overpower Celestia in the first place. Alas, my opportunities for empiric research on the matter has been, shall we say, rather few in number.

“Well, if that's the case there's certainly no use for us to remain here for any longer than we absolutely need to, now is there?” I arched an eyebrow at my changeling companion, and got an eager series of nods back. As we picked up our speed and speared through the sky once more, I slightly regretted the fact that we did not have a pegasus with us; with their control of the weather, the slight tailwind we presently had could easily have been transformed to a massive gale to propel us forth. But I digress. At least, it was a tailwind.

-/-/-

As we proceeded southward it became apparent that Elytra's foreboding of increased patrols were quite justified, but it was not until late in the afternoon that we were forced to actually halt our progress. We'd had to dig down into lower altitudes to avoid detection several times, and our course had been pushed steadily westward to avoid running straight into a pack of roaming pegasi. While initially this hadn't been much of a worry for either of us, we were now in the looming shadow of Canterlot Mountain. A lone, gargantuan spike of a peak that pierced into the heavens above like a stone imitation of the World Tree itself; situated in the middle between two minor mountain ranges, but not part of either of them by a wide margin. For some reason, that little detail seemed important.

At this time a band of civilian pegasi – workers, from the looks of it, possibly a weather patrol – had complicated matters enough that we'd been forced to take to the ground, and hide in a small forested area. Elytra's fear was threateningly apparent at this point, and it was beginning to take a toll on her. For the less magically inclined, I suppose I shall have to explain; the emotional energy of love, which largely fuels changeling magic and biology, is effectively neutralized by its fear-based counterpart, just like sine waves of opposing amplitudes neutralize each other. At a fundamental level, fear is rejection, while love is desire; polar opposites of the same

nature, unlike the complementary variations in nature that the different elements have. In short, she was dangerously close to experiencing the same thing as Chrysalis had when I first confronted her. A power leak; or as the changelings call it, an emotional breakdown.

I leave you to decide which term you like better.

Our saving grace was of course, now as always, my connection to the scholarly changeling's soul and our constant sharing of generated power. That, and the fact that she was hanging on for dear life to every bit of bravery and indifference I could supply her with; this prevented the situation from becoming critical and the young hiveling starting to cry liquid love, but we were by no means in the clear. The group of pegasi were still milling about above us – I could sense as much with my radar – and at regular intervals they were joined by what I assumed were guardsponies.

We were, for all intents and purposes, grounded. And despite me not having had my wings for even a week, it made me feel terribly inadequate. For a moment, at least – until I realized letting such emotions rule me now would be risking a horrible fate for my companion. So I did the next best thing, and latched on to my eternal ally: anger. "I guess we're hoofing it from here on, then." Elytra frowned but nodded all the same, empowered by my burst of emotions. Anger is like adrenaline to those guys, I tell you. Even now, their species never ceases to amaze me.

In short order we were marching onwards, scanning our surroundings with our respective empathy radars to see if the, hm, *heavy weather* would be letting up any time soon.

Naturally, it didn't.

Two hours of trekking later twilight was approaching slowly, but more importantly, so was the edge of the forest; a small gathering of minds spread uniformly across two levels of altitude hinted at a two-story mansion of some kind, right at the far end of my radar's range, and judging by its size it was likely to be surrounded by vast widths of farmland. There'd be no sneaking through that until dark was well upon us, which meant another night's worth of wasted sleep. Just thinking about it made me groan.

However, despair was soon replaced by curiosity as I noticed a certain...*oddity* among the mansion's minds. I didn't know how to describe it at the time, and there certainly is no real way to convey it simply through words. So at a loss was I that all I said to Elytra was the following:

“Elytra? Are you feeling this?”

My companion frowned at me, shaking her head slightly. “Nothing in my range yet. You're stronger than me in that regard. What is it?”

I wrinkled my nose slightly, shaking my head. “I don't know. It's...I can't describe it. For some reason it's like I'm being, *pulled* or something, in that directi- wait, where are you going?” At my words, Elytra had suddenly set off in a dash straight for the mansion, and keeping pace with her on foot was such a struggle that I had to use my gravity spell to keep up; jumping between trees like a hybrid of a squirrel and a ricocheting bullet. The chase continued only for a few seconds, until we reached the very edge of the woods; before us were, as I'd predicted, a vast swathe of farmland, and a lone, massive two-story mansion.

“Now I can feel it,” Elytra breathed, panting slightly from the exertion. Note to self; Changelings still require oxygen to breathe, despite their otherwise mostly magical metabolism. I'd assumed so in the past, but this was the first time I'd gotten actual confirmation of the fact. “I can feel it,” she repeated, hanging her head down trying to catch her breath, and what I felt of the burning pain in her chest and legs were well enough clue as to how much physical exertion the scholar was used to. “But...how...”

I gave my panting companion a few moments to get a hold of herself, before raising an eyebrow toward the mansion. “So what is it? Good or bad?” Discerning individuals out of the mass of people in the mansion was a bit easier now that I was closer, but it still took a lot of concentration. Scout-caste hivelings are supposedly extremely skilled at using their empathy radar, and Harvesters are gifted with more accuracy in picking out the emotions of particular individuals; Warrior-castes or Scholar-castes like Elytra don't have any of those strengths, however. I wonder: seeing as I got my powers from her, does it stand to reason that I received her Caste

enhancements as well? Sometimes magic can be just as logical as any other science, if you just apply the right mindset to it.

It took a few seconds before I got any answer out of her, and I couldn't make heads or tails out of the mishmash of thoughts whirling through her head. So I waited – impatiently – until she raised her head and gave me a very strange look. "That...is a hivelord. And judging from...the strength of this, one with practically no hivelings at all linked to her."

This reasoning was not one I understood, and I raised my other eyebrow as I turned my head to look at her. She drew a few deep breaths before continuing. "Changeling society requires balance on all planes to function. For a...Sovereign, like Chrysalis, this also includes making sure her hivelords are reasonably on par with each other in terms of power. Any hiveling linked only to the Sovereign, or not linked to anyone at all, will instinctively gravitate toward low-population hives and hivelords." She turned her eyes, gazing toward the mansion with a frown on her face. "We were probably pulled in this direction ever since we crossed into Canterlot province. For this feeling to be palpable is..."

She trailed off as her emotions swirled again, realization flaring up from nowhere. "I think I know who this is. No, it couldn't be anyone else. Hivelords don't simply plant themselves in the heart of Equestria for no reason, they're too valuable for that..." Her voice turned to a mutter as she started steadily marching toward the mansion, clearing the last bit of forest left around us and exiting onto the open field. I hesitated to follow her – there were likely still pegasi nearby, even if I couldn't sense any at the moment – but in the end, I had little choice in the matter. Dallying would only bring pain for both of us, as the bond between our souls struggled to force our physical bodies back together again. Thus, crouching low and trying to find as much cover as possible in the high-arching stalks of wheat and rye, I followed Elytra onto the field.

I anxiously scanned the sky as I struggled to catch up with her, but couldn't spot anything; thus I threw caution to the wind and stood up, running to her side. "Gods, Elytra, would it kill you to wait for me before rushing off? What if you'd been spotted, looking like that?"

She stopped for a moment to look at me, before turning back around and marching on – though her pace was a bit more sedate than before. “Not here, I wouldn’t have been. She wouldn’t have let it happen – moreover, I doubt she’d let the guards remain here for long in the first place.” She paused for a few seconds, and I could feel embarrassment simmering in her mind. “Also, the feeling gets stronger now that I know what it is. It’s...hard to stop myself. I suppose it’s easier for you, since you weren’t a changeling to begin with, but for me...it’s like fighting gravity without wings. Hard.”

I was a bit puzzled by that comparison, but there wasn’t much I could do than nod and accept it. What really stood out in Elytra’s words, however, was something else. “So,” I began, not entirely sure how to keep going. “*Her?* Who? The one inside the mansion? You know who it is, then?” I leaned to the side for a bit, brushing some wayward wheat stalks out of my way as I kept following my companion.

Elytra nodded eagerly. “Kassandra Megaea. She’s pretty famous, actually. As her name indicates, she’s the progeny of our previous Sovereign, King Megalos. A Scholar-caste of great power, and when she was raised to Hivelord she became one of the greatest mages in the history of the Basileal court. She guarded the capital from a great vassal rebellion, so she became pretty popular with most every changeling in Hermaima-Allagion overnight...” Her voice cut off, and awareness burst to life inside her as she started looking everywhere around her all of a sudden. Then, to my surprise, she started using our telepathic link instead of talking.

She was one of Chrysalis’ closest friends, well before she took the throne. Basically, Kassandra had no interest in succeeding her father. There’s a reason we Scholars don’t often land one of our number as Sovereign – we’re just not that interested in running a country. She took on a sheepish tone as she said this, but continued despite the brief spike of embarrassment. So when Chrysalis gained prominence and was Included into the court, they struck a fast alliance with each other. Megalos favored her greatly as well, and she gained popularity pretty fast – he appointed her as Diadochi, his heir, you see – and Chrysalis’ growing popularity among the hives made her a likely candidate of being elected thus, as well.

In a matter of seconds, I was – much to my surprise – being treated to a **large** serving of changeling politics. Habit from my previous Q&A sessions with Elytra made me instinctively cross-reference everything she mentioned with her own memories, but the sheer amount of material available – being from the capital, the scholar had seen or lived through virtually all of the various court intrigues she was talking about – made it a difficult struggle indeed. Seeing how bad it was for myself at the time, and the fact that I, writing skill notwithstanding, lack the ability to wholesale transfer my memories to people through text, I'll spare you the less vital details revealed on the matter. This is not, after all, a university course on alien sociology.

So instead of miserably failing at piecing together quotes from Elytra's long, scholarly telepathic rant, I shall give you a more or less sufficient summary on the famed lady of the mansion we were approaching. Well, the rest of it, at least.

Kassandra Megaea held the position of Court Magi in Hermaima-Allagion, served as the capital's regent twice during Megalos' reign, as well as during the electoral interregnum following her father's death. She was raised to Hivelord after the first regency, where she successfully defended the capital during her father's absence during a massive insurgent rebellion among the Changelings' vassals. While Chrysalis had, under Megalos' reign, been a close confidant, and hiveling, of the otherwise mostly hiveless Hivelord Kassandra, their roles switched after Chrysalis' coronation, with Kassandra becoming the new queen's Court Magi and most trusted advisor. Apparently rumors had circulated of a love affair between the two as well, and from what I could see of Elytra's memories on the matter it didn't seem all too far-fetched of a theory either. Amidst these rumors were, at least, the fact that Chrysalis in the second year of her reign favored her councilor with an additional name secondant, *Kalliste* – which if Elytra's knowledge on what I'm sure is greek serves me right, means something like “the fairest” – and the various implications of that whole business.

Then, of course, things had turned sour for the alleged lovebirds, with Kassandra growing bolder and rasher in her attempts to protect and further the interests of the Changeling kingdom. Elytra hadn't paid too much

attention to the deeper scope of her downfall, but the large of it was that Kassandra felt Chrysalis was acting too rashly, and when her majesty didn't listen to her she conspired with the rest of her court clique against the queen to put a stop to her plans. Her confidants were banished to other hives, and Kassandra was sentenced to ten years of exile, stripped of her favorable name and instead branded as *Erisea*, "the strife-sower".

Oh, and apparently she's also clairvoyant and/or a prophet. Just when I thought I'd mostly wrapped my head around magic, this comes along and slaps me in the face. Thanks, Murphy. You asshole.

All in all, Elytra promptly marched through the fields and up to the mansion's immense – and unguarded – doors, with me closely in tow. And while she steadily grew more and more confident the closer we got, I couldn't help but feel suspicious about the whole affair.

No, actually. I'll admit it. Not suspicious; afraid. Because the closer I got to the mansion, the more I too started feeling *the pull*. As if there was an iron collar around my neck, and someone inside – this Kassandra Megaea Erisea – was waving a huge electromagnet around, trying to draw me close enough to snap a chain on.

If you know me decently well – which you should do, after all this – you should be well aware that of the few things I both loathe and fear in this world, being bound is by far the greatest of them all. And so, while Elytra eagerly barged through the oaken double doors without a single second thought, I stood on the porch in wary doubt for half a minute before my resistance crumbled and I hasted after my companion. As the doors closed behind me, I could not help but glance at the last fleeing bit of daylight shining through, waning as the crack in the majestic wood creaked shut.

For inside the long, winding corridors of the mansion, not a single window was uncovered as far as I could see – only the eerie light of green-clad lanterns illuminated its viridian walls. I swallowed hard, and entered the exiled Hivelord's den.